

長月達平

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The only ability I got in a different world "Returns by Death"
I die again and again to save her.



Re:ゼロ

Re: Life in a different world from zero

から始める異世界生活

Re:Zero Kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu (WN)

Arc 5: Stars What Make History

by Nagatsuki Tappei

Info: [Novel Updates](#)

Translation Group: [Re:Zero Translation](#)

Epub:

[Trollo WN/LN EPUB](#)

Verticel



Re:ゼロ

Re: Life in a different world from zero

から始める異世界生活

『ご歓談中の皆様、お急ぎの方々、ごめんね、お騒がせしております』

刻限塔の上部、開放された窓から外に出て、危険な縁に立ち尽くす人影があった。

『ほんのひと時、こうして皆様の時間を拝借させていただきます。ありがとう』

——それは頭部を乱雑に巻いた包帯で覆い、ぎらつく左目で世界を睥睨する怪人だ。



『おお』

一瞬、眩しさに目を細めたあと、スバルは思わず感嘆の息をこぼしていた。それはスバルだけではなく、隣にいるエミリアも同じことだ。彼女は、その紫紺の瞳を大きく見開いて、眼前の美しい光景に言葉をなくしている。

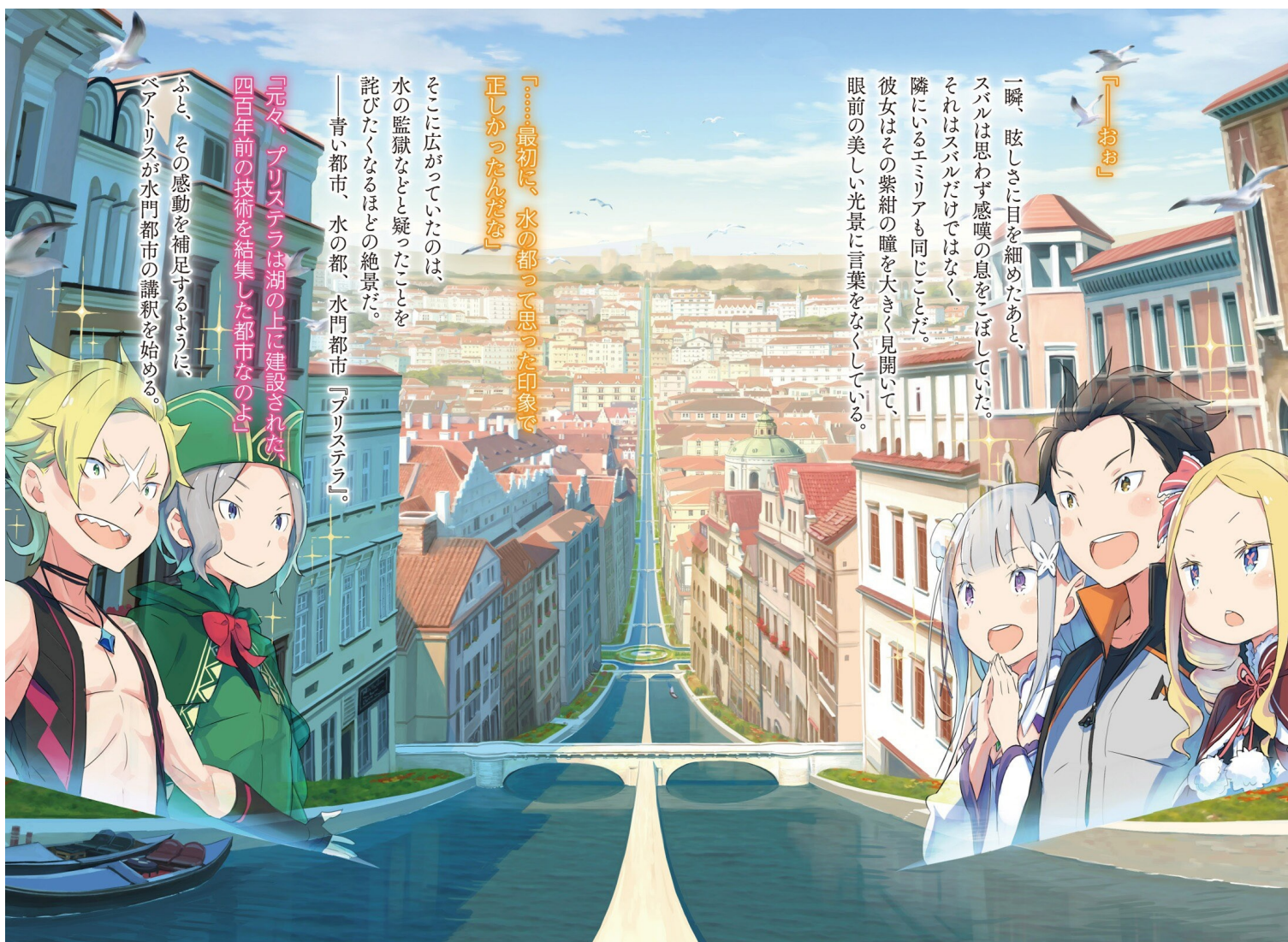
『……最初に、水の都って思った印象で正しかったんだな』

そこに広がっていたのは、水の監獄などと疑ったことを詫びたくなるほどの絶景だ。

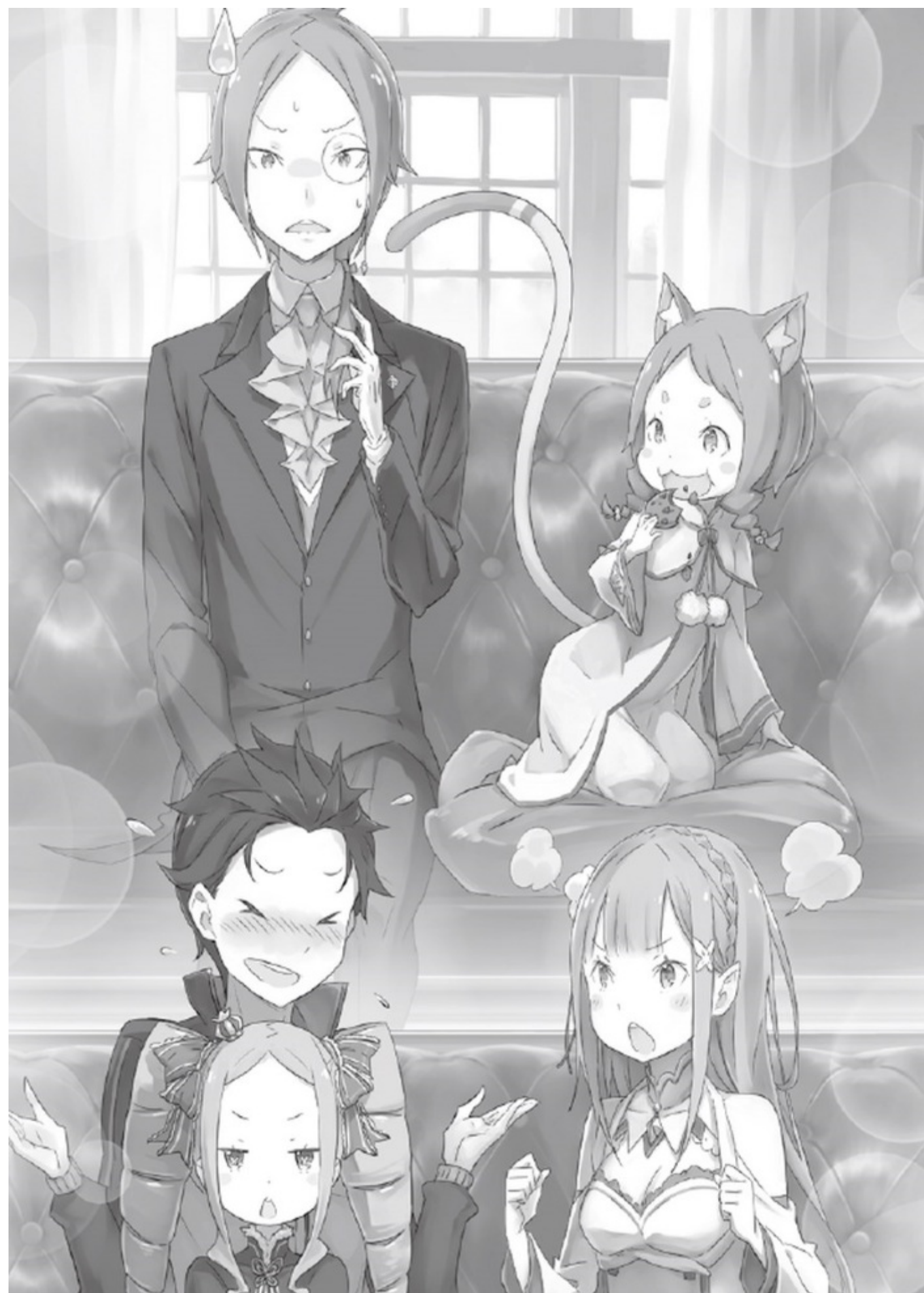
——青い都市、水の都、水門都市「プリステラ」。

『元々、プリステラは湖の上に建設された、四百年前の技術を結集した都市なのよ』

ふと、その感動を補足するように、ベアトリクスが水門都市の講釈を始める。





















Sidestory – One Day II

Chapter 1: The Relationship Of These Sisters

—Everyone subject to the scene would agree: this is unbearable to witness.

Garfiel: “H-Hey, Sis. That luggage looks pretty heavy there. Want my amazin' self to carry some?”

Frederica: “Garf... no, do not worry. I am merely offering some slight assistance, since it discomforts me to be constantly served as a guest. Feel free to relax, Garf.”

Garfiel: “O-oh. W-well, got it. Jus' holler 'f yer need anythin', 'kay?”

Garfiel scratches his cheek, standing stock still as Frederica pushes the trolley. Frederica gazes at him for a moment, but immediately pulls herself together and refocuses on her work.

The small wheels roll across the floor, their noise fading further down the mansion's hallway. Garfiel dazedly watches his sister grow distant.

Subaru: “...So annoying.”

Garfiel scratches at his short, blond hair, sighs, and walks off in the opposite direction from Frederica. Subaru puts his hand to his forehead, having witnessed this scene from around the corner of the hallway, and bemoans the irritating exchange.

Emilia: "They've had a week to calm down and talk... but they still look sooo uncomfortable."

Says Emilia, hidden in the same place and same manner as Subaru. Subaru was squatting while Emilia spied the exchange from above him.

Subaru feels Emilia's breath grow distant as he stands up and rotates his hips.

Subaru: "It's a decennary reunion... and one without any contact during the decade. I heard their goodbye wasn't exactly an invigorating one where they were wishing each other success, and I can understand it being awkward, but..."

Subaru crosses his arms and tilts his head.

He can understand it, but it's still irritating. Annoying. Watching them makes his back itch. Garfiel and Frederica have been like this ever since their reunion. While they pretend to be on acceptably affable terms when others are around, things are actually poor.

Garfiel might look emotional and impulsive, but he's a surprisingly good actor when he puts his mind to it. And there's no need mentioning how well Frederica conducts herself. They probably hadn't been planning to, but the siblings have successfully deceived quite a number of people in this handful of days.

But it's obvious to Subaru, who has often caught the two of them alone, and now Emilia's witnessed it too.

Emilia: "It looks like Garfiel's trying to approach her, but Frederica can't look at him straight in the eye. Even though they're finally back together. How come?"

Subaru: "It's hard to enjoy the reunion when the goodbye's so messy. I mean, I'm just going off my manga knowledge here. ...I think the problem's Frederica."

Emilia is right – Garfiel is ready to be open with Frederica. But Frederica looks less promising. Frederica might be feeling guilt toward her brother, who was left behind in SANCTUARY. During all of that time, Garfiel sharpened his fangs to secure a stubborn, childish heart.

Which comprised a third of the obstacles that Subaru had to deal with in SANCTUARY. Yes, Frederica is partly responsible for Garfiel's attitude.

But having said that, Frederica did not purposefully ruin Garfiel, and nobody is in the wrong here. Actually if anybody is in the wrong, then it's Roswaal.

And so not Subaru and not anyone else casts blame on Garfiel or Frederica.

—But it seems like they feel otherwise. Subaru: "Man, what a mess..."

It boils down to Frederica having an excessively strong sense of responsibility.

Frederica left for the outside world so that she could create a home for the people of SANCTUARY once the barrier was broken. She bore an incredibly noble and lofty burden for a ten-or-so year old girl. Perhaps that ambition of hers had been what caused her to leave Garfiel behind.

Ultimately SANCTUARY was lost, and what Frederica worried would happen did.

But thanks to her actions, there were places ready to accept them, scattered and shoddy though they were. And that was something she ought to take pride in.

Still, she feels more guilt than accomplishment. Because her guilty conscious must be overly strong.

Subaru: "What the hell, you can't do that. When you pull off something amazing, you have to puff out your chest with pride."

Emilia: "Mm. I agree. And if you think you did something wrong, apologize. Then they'll forgive you... I just want them to get along."

Both Garfiel and Frederica have vanished from the hallway.

Emilia looks at the spot where the two had faced off, her amethyst eyes narrowing. Subaru peers at her and nods.

Subaru: "Yeah."

Subaru: "Alright. We're gonna give them a little push so they can sort this out." Emilia: "Give them a push... you mean, have them make up?"

Subaru: "Yup. We have complicated brother-sister, sister-brother, human relations here. If the mood's so sticky they can't move, then how about some third parties cause enough ruckus to jolt things?"

Subaru claps his hands, raising his finger as he makes his proposal.

Emilia considers it for a moment in silence, before giving a determined nod.

Emilia: "You're right. Mmhm, families should get along. Okay. Let's do it. Let's do our plumb best to have them make up."

Subaru: "Who says plumb anymore?"

Mutters Subaru as a motivated Emilia balls her hands into small fists. While thinking: Man, it's been a while since we've done those lines.

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The reprieve from issues stemming from SANCTUARY had only been fleeting, as the two problems of terrible post-processing and housing assaulted Emilia's faction.

Roswaal's plot (parts of which he claimed no responsibility for) had burned down the mansion. They could rebuild it, but reconstructing a building that had been burnt to a clean crisp would take time. It seems that there is no convenient magic in this world to reform objects that have lost their shapes, or any Full Metal Alchemist-style techniques to erect buildings in an instant.

Their only choice was to contract a builder from a nearby village or town, or perhaps an architect specializing in noble estates and villas, to build it.

Roswaal: “Hoooooooooowever, that mansion was not my main house... it was an inconspicuous spot to shelter Emilia-sama while leading up toooooooo the Royal Selection. I was planning to move to the main house shortly after the Selection started. Soooooooo it's not as much of a problem aaaaaaaaas you're making it out to be.”

Is what Roswaal said when they started looking for somewhere to relocate.

Apparently the Mathers family has several mansions on hand, and the main house has already been prepared as their base of operations.

Nobody is residing in the main estate except for those maintaining the place.

Once the workers have everything prepared to welcome their masters in, the group will relocate their headquarters to there.

But where do they stay in the time between now and then?

Roswaal: “Don't worry, thaaaaaaat's also been addressed. Some relatives of mine have a mansion in a region noooooooooot far from SANCTUARY. They're a branch of the Mathers family. We can stay there for a while. Though I suspect the large number of guests will trouble them.”

'Roswaal's relatives' is an incredibly unsettling phrase, but nobody had any better plan.

After that discussion, the main players in Emilia's faction went to the relative's mansion, while Arlam and SANCTUARY's people went to Arlam Village. Perhaps so that SANCTUARY's residents could be accepted as residents of Arlam, they were purposefully introduced to other villages within Roswaal's territory.

Frederica had been the one to set the foundations for this, and it all ought to be considered her achievement.

Though, while all of SANCTUARY's residents are part-demihuman, they're also all half-bloods. None of them look too different from an ordinary human, so blending in won't be too hard.

And though they might have different customs due to their ignorance of the outside world, the kind people of Arlam would surely teach them the basics without hesitation.

Everything might look settled, but the problems will still keep piling up. Even so, no obvious trouble is occurring at the present, since everybody has done their absolute best.

Subaru prays that all the noticeable problems will be resolved before anything can happen.

—And he has judged Garfiel and Frederica's relationship troubles as something to resolve during this blissful, boring period.

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Subaru: “And thus masterplan Make Garfiel and Frederica Friends Again is a go... is sort of where we're sitting, do you have any suggestions?”

Ram: “This is the first thing you say to me upon entering the room? Intruding on my peace is a heavy crime to pay, Barusu.”

Says Ram in an emotionless voice, seated and glaring up at Subaru.

Her face is expressionless as always, but Subaru's relationship with her means he picks out the wisps of emotion swirling in her eyes. As a qualified interpreter of Ram's emotions, Subaru judges that she is currently 'displeased'.

Subaru: “I know you look at me like that a lot, but does that mean that you're basically always displeased when interacting with me? Don't you ever get tired of being cross all day?”

Ram: “Do relax. I only do this when speaking with someone annoying or pointless to interact with.” Subaru: “I see, alright th... no hold on.”

Subaru furrows his brows at Ram while she implies that he is currently one of the two. Ram snorts at Subaru's reaction before closing the book in her hands.

She stands from her seat and offers it to Emilia, who stands beside Subaru.
Ram: “Here you are, Emilia-sama.”

Emilia: “Thank you. But it's okay. I know it's exhausting if we stay for too long, so we'll be done quickly.”

Ram: "I see. Then I shall gladly take it."

Subaru: "So you're not offering it to me. You weren't kidding about gladly, geez, Sister."

Subaru shrugs as Ram seats herself back in the chair. But something that Subaru says makes Ram's brows furrow slightly.

She must be reacting to the word 'Sister'. Emilia: "Rem-san's still the same as before."

Ram: "...Indeed. Again today, she's sleeping so quietly that you cannot tell she's alive."

Emilia speaks with concern, and Ram replies with her voice slightly lowered. On the bed next to Ram's chair, where the pair are looking, sleeps a girl.

With short, blue hair and a face identical to Ram's. A light blue sleeping gown garbs her, and the size of her chest as it pushes the blanket up is the only point of difference between her and Ram.

Obviously, this girl's name is Rem.

She remained asleep through the mansion fire and their relocation. Until they remove whatever is causing it, she will likely remain sleeping forever.

Subaru: "Do you feel like accepting it yet?"

Ram: "I did tell you. I'm not so thoughtless as to believe entirely everything when I still haven't spoken to her yet. ...Though what I'm seeing is far too persuasive to dismiss entirely."

Complex emotion arises in Ram's eyes, and Subaru winds up frowning.

Ram's expression as she watches Rem sleep is horribly melancholy from Subaru's perspective, being that he knew their relationship. The elder doted on the younger, and the younger respected the elder.

Rem and Ram's relationship was the exact picture of beautiful, familial love.

As Rem sleeps, Ram's memories contain not name nor recollection nor existence of her beloved sister.

Subaru knew this would happen, he had anticipated this would happen, but it still makes him horribly disconsolate.

But even so—

Subaru: “You say it's complex, but you come visit here every day for her.”

Ram: “...I do wonder. Honestly, not even I know what I'm trying to do. But it calms me down to be with this girl you call my sister. ...No, part of me is unsettled too, but...”

Subaru: “Unsettled?”

Ram: “Because I'm seeing my own face... isn't quite it. When I look at her as she sleeps, I feel something astir in my heart. It's as though I'm chasing after mist, something which my hands will absolutely never grasp.”

Ram puts her hand to her chest. Subaru quietly gulps.

Everyone in the world except Subaru has forgotten Rem—but even so, she remains a thorn inside her only blood relative, Ram.

Ram doesn't seem to know the name of that thorn, but if it's something that Rem left to her dearest elder sister, then it constitutes more than enough of a

clue.

Subaru: "I'm open to tell you everything I can about what she's like or the times we've spent." Ram: "—I think we better not."

Subaru offers to help Ram recover her memories, but Ram shakes her head. Subaru's brows furrow as Ram puts her hand to her chin in thought.

Ram: "It's this, unreachable hollowness. It's like there's a hole inside me where she used to be. And if there is, anything you fill it with will definitely fall out. And even now, just hearing she's my sister... her appearance is the most obvious indicator, but it still doesn't feel real. It feels like, the moment I stop these daily visits... even what I'm feeling now will disappear."

Emilia: "...And that's the curse of the Witch Cult's GLUTTONY?"

Emilia interjects, looking like she cannot let the topic slide. Ram looks up to find Emilia with her brows lowered in a rare display of anger.

Ram: "A gross feast of NAMES and MEMORIES... My impression of the Witch Cult was never good, but it's certainly abhorrent now."

Emilia: "...Witch Cult."

Mutters Emilia quietly, her gaze lowered.

While Ram's speculation surprises Subaru, the maliciousness of it also makes him wince.

This doesn't feel real for Subaru, who remembers Rem clearly, but it isn't that Rem's existence is 'missing' from Ram and Emilia's memories. It's that it's 'missing in perpetuity'. Just how sand never stops falling from an hourglass, it is continuous, ongoing now and forever.

Subaru: “We can't do anything unless we stop what's causing it...”

The more Subaru talks about their memories together, the quicker the sand will fall. Perhaps even Subaru will forget the memory the second that he voices it.

Ram is concerned that Rem will disappear from the world—or at least that must be part of it. Ram: “It seems that you have some thoughts about the Cult, Emilia-sama.”

Subaru bites his lip while Ram looks up at Emilia. Her pale cheeks stiffen as Ram's cerise eyes gaze at her, before she slowly nods.

Emilia: “I've done lots of thinking about the WITCH. Because I've been cursed at so much for looking like her... but, the Cult is...”

Ram: “—”

Emilia: “Apparently it's something I wanted to forget. But I can't regard the one I remember and the one that's there now as the same. What could have happened since then, that it's like this now?

...That's what I want to find out.”

Subaru: “I don't really wanna say this, Emilia-tan, but... you get that they're not people you can really communicate with? It'll probably end up as a painful experience.”

He doesn't want to snuff Emilia's will, but it's unfair for him not to say it.

The Witch Cult that Subaru knows is a giant mass of malice constructed by a

bunch of religious crazies. He doesn't now what it used to be like. But that's what the cult is like now.

Emilia: "Thank you. For worrying about me."

Subaru's concern makes Emilia smile slightly, and she shakes her head.

Emilia: "It's okay, I understand. What happened in my memories, and the people I was with... it's all a century ago. There's no way they could still be alive. One hundred years is sooo much of a person's lifespan. I don't think I can meet them again."

Subaru: "But you still want to know what happened... right?"

Emilia: "I'm sorry, I know it's selfish. But I think I'm the only one who needs to find out. Because I'm the only one who saw what happened there, and the feelings that were there... and what Juice and Mother felt."

Emilia's eyes are sad as she imagines the two, but her mouth remains set in a gentle smile. There's her mother's name, and Juice. They're important memories for Emilia, and apparently connected to the old, utterly different Witch Cult.

Subaru: "Got some really mixed feelings here, Juice-san..."

Mutters Subaru to himself with a sigh, somewhat resentful toward someone he's never even seen. Emilia feels familiarity and sorrow for the name, and hearing it gives Subaru complex feelings. If the Witch Cult hadn't changed its course from when 'Juice' joined the fold, Emilia probably wouldn't have been put through so much crisis.

If he was going to be Emilia's ally anyway, Subaru would appreciate if he could've stayed at her side from start to finish. ...is the breed of selfish resentment he finds himself thinking.

Ram: “—I doubt I can be as kind as you, Emilia-sama.” Although as quiet as ever, her voice is full of chilling animosity.

Subaru's breath catches as he looks at Ram as she looks at Rem. Her face is expressionless, but the glint in her eye is shockingly red.

Ram: “The Witch Cult's particulars have nothing to do with me. I won't object to your desires to hear their story, Emilia-sama. I won't, but do remember that my revenge is another matter entirely.”

Emilia: “Ram...”

Ram: “I couldn't care less about this Cult or Gluttony, but I return what I'm given, be it debts or enmity. Dismembering the heart-gouging hellion still won't be enough for me.”

Grisly rage overflows from Ram, her petite frame seeming to blur.

As if a giant were there, emitting an overwhelming sense of presence—indeed, as if an oni were there.

Ram: “I'll eviscerate Gluttony so thoroughly that the memory demands awe.” It's less 'resolve' and more 'death sentence'.

The recipient is absent, and her tone is utterly calm. Nevertheless, this is unmistakably a death sentence—it feels like an icicle has speared down Subaru's spine, making him hesitate even to speak.

Subaru: “—”

With that, silence falls upon the room.

Even the noise from his fidgeting feels like it would break the tense atmosphere, so Subaru cannot move. What does shatter the stressful mood is in fact the person who caused it.

Ram: "It was unlike me to say that."

She sighs, the tense atmosphere vanishing entirely. Subaru lowers his shoulders in relief,

Subaru: "No, it wasn't unlike you. The Ram I know was someone who did get violent when stuff involved her little sister."

Ram: "...I see."

Ram's statements had been disturbing, but she had definitely been thinking purely about Rem when she spoke them. Subaru appraises it on that point alone, making him feel glad for Ram's sentiments. Besides, Subaru can't forgive GLUTTONY either. If he can then he wants Gluttony's neck for himself, without even handing it over to Ram.

The sensation of murder. —The slipshod conclusion to his fight with Betelgeux left very little direct feeling in Subaru's palms. Perhaps Subaru's hesitation toward taking a life could stymie him at the critical moment.

But still, he cannot forgive GLUTTONY, and he has the resolve to do it if it's to save Rem. Subaru: "...We got really off topic."

Subaru scratches his head, his dark thoughts not showing in his expression.

Ram looks at him meaningfully, and Emilia looks at him concernedly, but Subaru had managed to smile at both of them, surely.

Ram: "You're right. Now, since you're intruding on me as I enjoy my unexpected holiday, I'm sure your business must be suitably important."

Subaru: "Why are you so audacious when pressuring people? Frederica's in your position and she feels so apologetic about getting guest treatment that she's helping in the mansion..."

Ram: "I'm wounded. And Frederica's the one failing to read the mood by working when she's being received as a guest. ...She can't stay composed when with Garf, and Clind is inciting her into it too."

Subaru: "Clind-san is?"

This is the name of the Mathers family's young butler who is tending to Subaru and the others. He is handsome, with a slender face, who exudes an incredible aura of grace and capability. He gives a similar vibe to Julius, but unlike Julius Clind is polite and incredibly considerate.

And so Subaru thinks it strange that Ram doesn't seem to think too fondly of him. Though perhaps that's just what everyone looks like to Ram when they're not Roswaal.

Ram: "You should ask Frederica and Clind themselves about how poorly they interact. Anyway, I'd like to return to my reading, so do state your business quickly."

Emilia: "I'm sorry, we just keep on talking. I think Subaru mentioned this right at the start, but it's about Frederica and Garfiel..."

Emilia valorously gets to changing the topic.

'Let's do something about Garfiel and Frederica's awkward relationship!' was

a nice idea and all, but Subaru and Emilia found themselves absolutely stuck on what to do.

Since neither of them are very experienced when it comes to mending sibling relationships.

Subaru is an established only-child, and so is Emilia.

Neither of them have been blessed with siblings, so nothing comes to mind when it comes to non-parental blood relations. And in Garfiel and Frederica's case they don't even have ordinary parental relations, but we'll leave that part aside.

So they wandered around the mansion in search of advice, and visited Ram, who stays in a fixed location.

And Subaru considers her the closest sister he knows. Though her relationship with Rem is gone from everyone's memory except Subaru's, he hopes that Ram might have something useful to say, considering that she and her sister had such a good relationship.

And even disregarding that, Ram is childhood friend of Garfiel and Frederica. Maybe something from an episode that Subaru wasn't around for will make her hit on an approach to fill this decade-long divide.

Emilia almost gives Ram an expectant gaze, when her lips come to a halt.

Subaru tilts his head at the frozen Emilia, wondering what happened, before following her gaze— and freezing still as well.

Ram: "...What?"

Ram narrows her eyes, looking terribly uncomfortable.

In her hands she holds a book, at which Emilia and Subaru stare.

The title, “How to Grow Closer to Your Younger Sibling,” is horrifically critical to the current affair.

—It seems that they aren't the only ones feeling clueless about sibling relations.

Chapter 2: Young Souls And Watcher

Having learned that Ram is useless regarding sibling problems without her memory, but that she is nonetheless a good sister, time passes on for Subaru and Emilia with no good progress.

Subaru: “But don't you feel like Ram was being pretty unsympathetic?”

Emilia: “Don't say that. Ram has her own opinions. ...She's known them longer than we have, so that's probably the difference.”

Emilia smiles wryly at the pouting Subaru as they walk down the mansion hallway.

They have left Rem's bedroom and are reflecting on the encounter as they venture about. Through Subaru's mind passes the words that Ram left them with before their departure:

Ram: <Garf and Frederica's relationship? It should be fine to just leave them be. They aren't children... well, Garf is a kid, but he's not bereft of his own ideas. Though said ideas tend to be inaccurate. They'll manage something on their own.>

It's a rather ruthless judgement on Garfiel, what with how fond he is of Ram.

But it's possible that Ram regards Garfiel as something like a younger brother. His crush could be called cute, were the feelings not so intense and violent.

Poor Garfiel, infatuated with a fortress of a woman. Emilia: “—? Hm? What's wrong?”

Subaru: “No, it's nothing. Was just reflecting that man, Garfiel's not the only

one looking at a tall hurdle.”

Emilia: “—?”

Emilia tilts her head cutely.

Subaru hates how her mind utterly fails to put together what his gaze and words mean. Perhaps the fact that he winds up forgiving it is one of those foibles of loving someone.

Subaru: “Anyway, so Ram's out... who to consult next?” Emilia: “Huh? You're going to keep trying?”

Subaru: “Well yeah. We haven't solved anything yet, and there's nothing manly about giving up 'cause you stumbled on the first step. Don't you want to improve their relationship too, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “I do, but... Ram knows them best, and that's what she said, so maybe that's the best thing to do.”

Subaru: “Leaving them be might solve the problem over time, but you can't forget that it's been a decade since they parted. I'm not going to wait another decade for them to reconcile. I want to give them a shove so they make up quickly.”

Subaru insists that they stick with the plan, while Emilia seems somewhat pressured by Ram's statement. That said, while Subaru does want Garfiel and Frederica to reconcile, he also wants to keep this chance to do things with Emilia from escaping.

Since no matter what Subaru does in this caper, it won't escalate into bloodshed. Could this heart, after all that protected trial and error, ever feel so

light?

Emilia: “What happened? Subaru, you just burst into a grin...”

Subaru: “No, was just thinking that mulling over things without being frantic about it is bliss. Wow! No matter how everything falls, there's no bloodshed and nobody dies!”

Emilia: “Subaru...”

Subaru shoots her a thumbs up, his teeth sparkling, but Emilia looks at him with incredible pity. Subaru thinks back on his statement, figuring that he must have said something strange. And then shocks himself at what a brutal, inappropriate comment it was, and how impoverished his desires are.

Subaru: “D-Disregard that, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “It's okay. I know it's been hard. I'm sorry I didn't realise how you felt. Subaru, maybe you should spend the day resting in your roo—”

Subaru: “No not happening and that reaction's for when you don't realise how I feel!” Emilia gazes at him with sympathy.

And, at that point in the conversation,

???: “...So you're the ones making this racket, I suppose.”

Sighs a voice. Subaru looks over to the speaker, to find a girl in an extravagant dress standing there

—Beatrice.

She has come from the other end of the hallway and stopped to look at Subaru and Emilia, her brows furrowed on her cute face.

Beatrice: “You two are certainly enjoying yourselves, in fact. I can hear your arguing from the other end of the mansion, I suppose.”

Subaru: “There's some sarcasm. If you're sad you're not included then just say it. We'll let you deliberate with us in our profound discussion hour.”

Beatrice: “Who said anyone is sad about being left out, in fact! Don't just go saying whatever you want, I suppose!”

Beatrice crosses her arms, her cheeks red with indignation. Both Subaru and Emilia have to smile at how incredibly Beatrice the attitude is.

About a week has passed since Subaru and Beatrice formed their contract. That said, nothing especially dramatic changed about their relationship.

Subaru teases Beatrice like always, and Beatrice overreacts. These exact same exchanges unfold endlessly for these two.

But, Beatrice has been more out and about lately. And sometimes, as if remembering something, she comes to hold Subaru's hand.

Subaru: “And so on is what you say, but really you're here because you wanna hold my hand. Oh geez this poor girl's too much.”

Beatrice: “Don't distort Betty's actions by giving them these weird pretexts, in fact. Betty keeps touching you because circumstances demand it, I su... Subaru, I suppose.”

Subaru: "It is adorable how you reminded yourself to say that." Emilia: "Subaru."

Emilia cautions Subaru as Beatrice's face goes red. Subaru pokes his tongue out at Emilia and reaches out for Beatrice.

Her hand lightly closes around his fingers, before she re-thinks it and timidly grasps his hand proper. It's what Beatrice always does.

He feels her small fingers on his palm. This tickly, awkward touch is the fruit of Subaru's labour. But this time Beatrice does not do it, and instead she simply stares at Subaru's hand, hesitant.

Subaru: "What's up? I do wash my hands after going to the bathroom."

Beatrice: "I wasn't worried about that, but now that thought's going to be in my head and it's disgusting, in fact! No, it's something else..."

Beatrice glares in response to Subaru's unneeded comment, and she glances behind her. Subaru tilts his head at that, when he hears the answer come from down the hallway.

???: "Where'd you go, Beatrice-chan?"

A voice calls from down the hallway, beyond a corner, searching for Beatrice. The voice is female, filled with affection and friendship.

But hearing it makes Beatrice's shoulders hitch up, Beatrice: "Eep!"

Squeaks Beatrice, her eyes darting around before she dives into a nearby room. Subaru and Emilia watch on wide-eyed as Beatrice peeks out from behind the door.

Beatrice: “Tell her that I'm not here, I suppose. Please, in fact.” Subaru: “Hey.”

Beatrice: “Please, I suppose.”

With that, she silently shuts the door. Subaru shrugs while Emilia furrows her brows in confusion. And,

???: “Oh! Subaru!”

A girl appears from beyond the bend in the hallway, her face lighting up as she comes darting over. With the skirt of her maid outfit fluttering, the auburn-haired girl trots near—it's Petra.

Petra is also staying in this mansion following the incineration of Roswaal's estate. Considering the danger that comes with being involved, Subaru had tried to convince her to go back to the village, but she refused to listen.

Petra has been utterly focused on helping with odd jobs around this mansion as part of her maid training. What an ambitious, disciplined girl, Subaru thinks.

As if complimenting Subaru's thoughts, Petra curtseys politely to Emilia,

Petra: “Please forgive me, Emilia-sama. I present my apology for having raised my voice.” And says that.

The childishness she displayed toward Subaru instantly disappears, and Emilia's eyes widen at the maidly behaviour.

Emilia: “Ah, um, it's okay. Don't worry. You can please relax, knave.” Subaru: “Emilia-tan, 'knave'?”

Emilia is going to need to learn how to respond when others humble themselves around her. But putting aside that messy-yet-heartwarming conversation,

Subaru: “So, what's up, Petra. Something happen?”

Petra: “No, nothing has happened... but since I've finished my work, I was thinking to entertain Beatrice-chan. But I haven't been able to find her.”

Emilia: “Beatrice-chan... gosh.”

Emilia's breath hitches, and she puts her hand to her mouth as she holds in her laughter. Subaru also comes close to snickering. Beatrice, for all of her hauteur, has been dubbed with a -chan by Petra.

Subaru burst into laughter when he first caught them interacting.

Petra: “Is there something the matter, Emilia-sama? Have I perhaps said anything strange?” Emilia: “No, nothing. I just thought that was a bit sooo funny.”

Petra: “'A bit' but 'sooo'?”

Sometimes Petra's childishness does come to the fore. Emilia gives her a smile and glances to Subaru, her gaze asking him what to do.

Subaru pretends to mull over the issue,

Subaru: “Right. Beatrice. She loves the attention, so I'm sure you have fun fussing over her too?”

Petra: “Mhm, I do. Beatrice-chan isn't honest at all. She's super cute whenever I'm with her. I don't think people like her should be left on their own.”

Subaru: “Why do you think that?”

Petra: “Cause she'd be lonely. You can't leave her there.” Subaru nods to Petra's smart-yet-simple reply.

It took a lot of words to get there, but ultimately it's the same reasoning by which Subaru dragged Beatrice out of the Forbidden Archive. Children see to the truth of things. Or really Subaru and Beatrice just argued at each other using child's logic.

Petra: “How come you're laughing now too, Subaru?”

Subaru: “It's not that I'm making fun of you. It's just that you're so brilliant, Petra.” Petra: “Really? Eheehee.”

Subaru pats Petra's head and gives her a nod.

Then he puts his hand on the doorknob behind him, and swings the door open. Beatrice: “Whaugh!?”

With a thunk, an eavesdropping loli gets sent to the floor.

The loli pushes herself back up, her eyes teary and forehead red from the door belting against her. Subaru: “The heck are you doing.”

Beatrice: “Moreso what the heck are you doing, in fact! This hurts! This sincerely hurts, I suppose! It hurts and furthermore you broke your promise...”

Subaru: “I didn't promise anything, and I didn't even say I'd do it. After taking careful consideration of who to support, I decided that supporting Petra'd be funnier.”

Beatrice: “Funnier! Funnier, he says, in fact! Just abysmal, I suppose!”

Complains Beatrice, rubbing her forehead while Subaru blocks his ears, pretending not to hear her. When a girl cuts into their exchange. Petra faces Beatrice directly, making Beatrice's mouth gawk open and pigtails bob.

Beatrice: “Ah, erm, um, don't get the wrong idea, in fact... I, I wasn't hiding from you or anyth...”

Petra: “Come on, Beatrice-chan. You're going to get told off if you play hide and seek in other people's mansions. Though I understand wanting to play so much you can't help it...”

Beatrice: “What!? S-stop acting as though Betty were a child, I suppose! Though I might look like this, I am fully an... erm, fully an...”

Petra: “Fully an?”

Beatrice: “...Nevermind, in fact.”

In the end, Beatrice surrenders. Emilia looks surprised, and Subaru also closes his eye at the unfamiliar happenings.

The entertaining thing about Beatrice and Petra's relationship is that somehow Petra is the dominant one.

Beatrice always maintains a haughty, cocksure attitude when interacting with anyone. Subaru and Puck had been the exceptions, and now Petra has thrust herself into that count.

For some reason, Beatrice can't interact with Petra using her normal demeanour. Not even she seems to understand why that is. But Subaru has spotted her holding hands with Petra, looking rather reluctant about the whole thing, several times now.

Nevermind what Beatrice thinks, to an outsider they're just a couple of young girls. And this is two girls, with portents of feature beauty, holding hands. A charming spectacle.

Petra looks slightly older than Beatrice. Perhaps it's happening because Beatrice struggles to counterbalance Petra when she behaves like an older sister.

Petra: "Okay, let's go. We don't want to interrupt Subaru and Emilia-sama's work. And Brother Clind got some sweets for us, so let's go eat them together. In the dining room."

Beatrice: "O-Okay, I suppose. I'll go... so you don't need to pull me along, in fact."

Beatrice sends a pleading look to Subaru as Petra leads her out of the room by the hand, but Subaru cruelly replies with a thumbs up. Emilia waves her goodbye as Petra drags her away, still looking mad and with her tongue sticking out.

That circumstances-demanded skinship with Subaru will have to come later. Emilia puts her finger to her lip as she contently watches one girl abduct the other,

Emilia: "That is sooo surprising. I didn't expect Beatrice to be weak to Petra."

Subaru: "Right? It stunned me at first. It's adorable to watch though so I didn't say anything. And I think Petra's totally right."

Emilia: “She'll be sad if left alone?”

Subaru: “I don't mind being with her all hours of the day, but that defeats the point of leaving the Archive. If she's making memories, then the pages of her photo album ought to have as many people in them as possible.”

Since she has to compensate for four centuries of blank pages. If Subaru consumes all of the space in her album, it's going to get samey quick.

Her memories need to be full of lots of people and lots of faces. Subaru believes it best to stand at her side as she clicks the shutter, sometimes slipping into the frame.

Emilia: “Subaru... sometimes you are sooo cool.”

Subaru: “Huh, what, seriously? What happened, what RNG was that!?” Emilia: “It really is only sometimes though.”

Subaru scratches his cheek as Emilia giggles.

While it was somewhat joking, compliments from Emilia inevitably get him excited. He wants to always be reminded of this feeling whenever he teases Beatrice. Gotta keep teasing her now.

Subaru: “Feels like the aims and the means swapped places, but you do get that sometimes. Now, we got to see that heartwarming sight, so next is...”

???: “Indeed, a heartwarming sight. The spectacle of two girls with their lovely souls, smiling as they join hands... that is this world's splendour. Effulgence.”

Emilia: “Eek!?”

Just when Subaru starts moving to the next topic, a voice speaks up that makes Emilia yelp. Because the speaker's arrival is just that abrupt and unexpected.

And their location is just as unexpected as their arrival. This character stands behind Subaru, so close that he can feel their breath on his neck, their expression nonchalant as they join the conversation.

???: “I do apologize for the surprise. But I could not suppress my occupational urge to present you with astonishing service. Misfire.”

Subaru: “C-Clind-san?”

Clind: “Yes, this is Clind. I do hope that I have not fouled your temper? Trepidation.” A handsome, slender man gives them a perfect bow.

His blue hair is just long enough to touch his shoulders, and he wears a monocle on his left eye. His starched, black butler suit seems to take joy in being his clothing as it perfectly displays its potential, his every movement so refined that Subaru unwittingly has to stand up straight.

This man's posture is so perfect that it could be a match for Wilhelm's, but the aura that Clind exerts differs from the Sword Demon's.

If Wilhelm gives the impression of a honed blade, then Clind is the flow of pristine waters. Material beauty is dissimilar to conceptual beauty. Though both soothe the mind equally.

Subaru: “It's kind of shitty to show up behind people out of nowhere, Clind-san... almost had a heart attack.”

Clind: “Should that occur, we will devote our utmost efforts into your resuscitation. There is no need to fret for everything is well. Death's Door.”

Subaru: “Um!? Except that's no help at all!?”

While Clind's polite gestures remain strong, his reply falls apart terribly.

However, his current behaviour gives no indication to his personality or capabilities. Clind is as excellent a servant as he appears, being the paragon butler of the Milord household.

Although young, he keeps the mansion in order with his bold personality.

And that isn't all—he's even capable of swordsmanship in an emergency. He is so skilled that, when they first met, Garfiel tried to pick a fight with him: “Guy's pretty fuckin' good.” Though Clind ignored the duel invitation.

However, for all of Clind's excellence, he does have some flaws. One of them is his demonstrated penchant for mischief. Another is,

Emilia: “Petra hasn't been any trouble for you, has she? I know that you're letting her participate in the work, but I'm still kind of worried...”

Clind: “There is no need for worry. Petra is outstanding for a girl of her age. I await to see how her proficiency and beauty shall bloom. Envy.”

Emilia: “I see. Thank goodn—”

Clind: “However, she shall grow into an adult. ...Which I find a terrible shame. Chagrin.” Clind furrows his brows, looking utterly disappointed.

This is one of his flaws, and a big one.

Clind is extremely interested in young girls like Petra and Beatrice. Putting it straight, he's into little girls—a lolicon.

Clind: “What could be the matter, Natsuki-sama? You look as though you've seen a prospective criminal. Have I perhaps done something untoward? Confirmation.”

Subaru: “It sort of seems as though you're self-aware about it, considering how precise that comment was. I'm not really into younger girls so you have that, but seriously when they're that young...”

Clind: “It appears that you could be under a terrible misapprehension. Smile.”

Smile, he says, while not smiling in the least. His attractive face darkens dejectedly as he adjusts his monocle, and he turns to face Subaru.

Clind: “Do I have your attention? I do not admire Anne-Rose-sama, nor Petra nor Beatrice-sama because they are young. It is because I am infatuated with the promise and youth of their souls. To be enraptured by pure, immaculate souls is natural. And it happens that many possessors of such souls are young. Thus Misapprehension.”

Subaru: “Well... great.”

Clind gives a speech to rebut Subaru, though Subaru tunes out for most of it. However, Clind's next words destroy that attitude of Subaru's.

He looks at Emilia, and, Clind: “In fact,”

Clind: “My eyes perceive a similar lustre to Emilia-sama's soul. Purity.” Emilia: “Me?”

Subaru: "Goddamn geez, Clind-san!"

Emilia tilts her head. Subaru can only find himself shocked and awed at Clind's perception.

It should not be possible to determine that Emilia is mentally much younger than she appears without investigating her background and upbringing. Clind's eyes have penetrated straight through that, and he has ascertained that Emilia is mentally a loli.

A lolicon's nose is to be feared, thinks Subaru in dumb astonishment. Subaru: "So then Lewes-san or something'd be..."

Clind: "Her appearance is exceedingly darling, but her soul is matured. It is beyond the means of someone as callow as I to divine promise from someone so set in their ways. Recklessness."

Subaru: "Amazing..."

It truly impresses Subaru that he can see through the loligranny.

Emilia has been party to this exchange, but doesn't seem particularly interested in Clind's fetishes. Emilia: "Clind-san, there's something I kind of want to ask..."

Clind: "Please ask whatever you wish. Inquiry."

Emilia: "Did Frederica use to work here before she started working in Roswaal's mansion?" Clind: "...Indeed. Affirmation."

Subaru furrows his brows, sensing that Clind was tongue-tied for a second. The hesitation makes Emilia blink too, but the conversation continues as is.

Emilia: "Which means that you've known Frederica for a long time?"

Clind: “Frederica and I have known each other for a decade—I was still a manservant who had only just begun work when the Margrave brought Frederica to the Milord household. We would have known each other since then. Old Friends.”

Emilia: “I knew it! Okay, so I have a question about Frederica. Is there anything she likes or dislikes that we can use as a starting point for her to reconcile with Garfiel?”

Clind: “A starting point for reconciliation. Ruminating.”

Clind puts his hand to his chin, in thought. He looks pretty as a portrait even while ruminating. Subaru fiddles with his track suit zipper while lamenting, “So hot guys can get away with being lolicons...” about the amazing differences in beauty.

After a minute of thought, Clind nods with a quiet sight.

Clind: “I shall make chicken the primary dish for Anne-Rose-sama's next birthday. Plan.” Emilia: “Where'd Frederica go!?”

Clind: “...Ah, forgive me. Whenever I attempt to meditate upon her, my brain unfailingly rejects it. I'm afraid this is my idiosyncrasy. Beg Your Pardon.”

Emilia: “Do you maybe not get along with Frederica, Clind-san?” Clind: “Preposterous. Denial.”

Clind shakes his head at Emilia.

Clind: “She is an excellent servant who conducts her work swiftly and accurately, and is also proficient in tact. Should you ignore that her appearance sullies her station, what demands the maid to be adorned in splendour and beauty, I have not any complaints about her. Indifferent.”

Emilia: "Um? I think I just heard something extremely prejudiced, but is that just me? Subaru?" Subaru: "No it's not just you, it's just Clind-san."

It seems like Clind's unrelenting prejudice springs from Frederica's appearance. While yes, the initial impact of it did startle Subaru, Frederica is actually both diligent and abounding in femininity. There's nothing wrong about her as a woman except her appearance.

Clind: "I sense that Natsuki-sama has reached the same conclusion as myself. Espy." Emilia: "Did you? Subaru?"

Subaru: "I'm trying to end my habit of probing for other people's flaws, so could you please not!? Emilia-tan your looks are a mega critical on me!"

Emilia: "That's not what we were talking about, geez. ...But, thank you." Says Emilia, her cheeks slightly flushed.

These compliments seemed utterly ineffective before, but since Emilia finished the TRIAL they've starting working on her somewhat, which is novel.

Puck isn't around to give Emilia lessons on fashion any more, and she's gotten into the practice of dealing with her own grooming and dress. Apparently she's been doing some trial and error on what looks stylish.

Though naturally when she started thinking about chopping her silver hair short, everyone collectively yanked the breaks on it.

Either way, it doesn't seem like they're going to get any useful information about Frederica from Clind. Subaru and Emilia sigh, hitting a quick dead end yet again.

When Clind speaks up,

Clind: "Simply as speculation..."

Clind: “Judging by what I have heard, could you be seeking an improvement to the sibling relationship between Frederica and Garfiel-sama? Conjecture.”

Emilia: “Yes, we are. But neither me or Subaru have any brothers or sisters, so we have no idea what to do. We've been asking around, but...”

Clind: “Being that Frederica's only issue is her appearance, I believe that issues pertaining to

Frederica that are unrelated to her appearance will resolve themselves if left alone. But it seems that you may find this stance unsatisfactory. And so I offer. Proposal.”

Both: “Proposal?”

Clind raises his finger. Subaru and Emilia tilt their heads in unison. For the first time that day, Clind smiles.

Clind: “If you are concerned about them, then ought you not speak to the person closest to them? Not Ram, but another? Opinion.”

Emilia: “Closest to them... oh!”

Emilia claps her hands, her eyes shooting open as she finally hits upon this idea. Subaru reaches the same conclusion, but something is bothering him first.

Which is,

Subaru: “Not Ram? I'm pretty sure we only mentioned her ages ago, Clind-san, how long've you been listening to us talk?”

Clind: "It is because I am the butler entrusted with the peace and chores of the Milord household. Declaration."

It kind of sounds like an answer and also kind of doesn't. Subaru scrunches his face up while Clind bows respectfully.

His conduct as a subordinate is so perfect that it overwhelms any observers. All Subaru can do is shut his mouth, and look sour.

Chapter 3: Pretty Girl, Pretty Lady, Pretty Granny

Subaru: “And thus we hastened to speak with Lewes-san who we figure knows them best.”

Lewes: “I'd call yer approach conscientious, all told. I don't mind yer relying on me... but I don't gert much I can say on the topic.”

Subaru: “Meaning?”

Lewes: “Meaning I agree with Ram and Clin-chan. Their problem ers their problem. It's not something outsiders need ter get too involved with.”

It doesn't look like Lewes is too interested in Subaru's proposal as she sips her tea. However, she is undeniably a key figure in this whole affair. Subaru is sticking his neck into their business with too little frivolity to back down that easily.

Subaru: “I get that their circumstances are an annoying mess. Since I've been involved in it if only tangentially.”

Lewes says nothing.

Subaru: “But I don't think it's something to just leave alone. I mean maybe it will resolve itself in time... but it's aggravating both to them and to onlookers how they're trying settle things, but it just isn't working. If a third party can do something about it, then they should.”

Lewes: "That sounds like a load'erv hard-nosed meddling."

Subaru: "Well I do have a reputation for being shameless and dense."

Subaru puffs his chest out in pride although it likely wasn't a compliment. Lewes smiles wryly at him.

The two of them are in a corner of the large room given to Lewes, sitting across from each other at a table as they sip from their cups, silently wetting their throats with tea. When,

???: "Excuse me, guys?"

A voice calls to them from a short distance away.

The speaker narrows their amethyst eyes, their gaze akin to glare as it pierces Subaru. Dissatisfaction laces the voice of the speaker, uninvolved as she is in the conversation, Emilia.

Subaru: "What's up, Emilia-tan? I mean you're cute when you're angry, but your forehead's getting all wrinkled."

Emilia: "If you think so, then shouldn't you come and help!? Geez! You're so mean, Subaru! You ninny!"

Subaru: "Who says ninny anymore?"

Subaru smiles at Emilia's proficient and adorable use of outdated language as he sets down his teacup. He looks again at Emilia, and tilts his head at the situation she faces.

Subaru: “You can really call this a spectacle. A fantastical drama unfolding between a pretty lady and some pretty girls.”

Lewes: “Yer gonner make me blush, saying that.”

Subaru: “You mingle too and it'll be a drama between pretty girls, a pretty lady and a pretty granny.”

Lewes: “Yer gonner make me blush, saying that.” Subaru: “Seriously!?”

It shocks Subaru that, just when he expected her to grumble at him, she accepts it. Lewes's cheeks as she watches on with Subaru are faintly red.

The two of them gaze at a bunch of Leweses identical to the blushing Lewes, surrounding Emilia in a mob.

—They brought 26 Lewes doubles from SANCTUARY in total.

These are the subservient, non-sentient doubles who are not the representative Lewes. Though the faction has no tasks for them, they cannot simply leave them sitting there, so they present another issue for everybody to mull over.

And the biggest problem here is,

Emilia: “Don't just look, Subaru, come help me.”

Subaru: “I'd love to, but they're not gonna listen to me. You and Garfiel are the only ones who can command them. Just gotta finangle them with some witty eloquent language.”

Emilia: “I know, but... we only just had a terrible fiasco when I told them to STEP AWAY. Did you forget, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Nobody would forget a three-days-passed organized search effort that went all the way over the mountains.”

Subaru thinks back on the debacle from three days ago.

Crystals in Sanctuary govern the doubles' command right. One had been installed in the tomb, and one in the laboratory, each of which recognized either Emilia or Garfiel as rightholders, and presently continue to do so.

Meaning that the doubles remain in a doll-like state, unable to act without Emilia or Garfiel's orders. They pay no heed to anyone else's instructions. Garfiel says that, if they leave them without any tasks, they will literally sit there doing nothing until they die and disappear.

The debacle from three days ago happened when Emilia, ignorant to the command right's limits, tried to have the doubles spread out a little distance from the mansion by telling them to 'step away'. The annoying part is that the doubles have their own personal differences, and interpreted the command in slightly different ways. Some of them perfectly adhered to Emilia's intentions, some of them exited the mansion, and some of them sprinted far from the mansion into the distance.

Were it not for Garfiel's nose and legs, they might not have retrieve them all. They can't just leave

these cute, doll-like girls to walk around undefended. And it's problematic if people start questioning the doubles.

Subaru: “Twins or triplets is one thing, but nobody'd believe in twenty-sextuplets...”

Subaru doesn't remember what the Guinness World Record was, but it was probably less than ten. There's no point even considering it; there is no way they can use the siblings excuse here.

And as for why they have to come up with excuses in the first place,

Lewes: “They were obviously made using forbidden techniques. Frankly said, it'd be an uproar if people found out what we were.”

Subaru: “Aaas figures.”

Lewes: “Yer taking someone as a foundation point, and constructing mock-od of a similar nature to them to make them—essentially yer making infinite soldiers. There's people out there who'll want that.”

Leaving aside the question of practicality there, they are useful for research. Since they're basically an infinite subject base. You can use the command right to keep them from rebelling, and they disperse into mana when they die so there's nothing to clean up.

Subaru: “Which is all absolute shit.”

Lewes: “It relaxes us ter know yer think that, Su-bo.”

Subaru feels something indescribable as he watches Lewes smile thinly.

Repulsion that his acquaintance could be exploited, and aversion due to the ethical issue. Those feelings are why Subaru feels adverse to the concept.

But when he dispels those feelings, and considers the technique detachedly, how long will his resistance really hold against the sheer convenience of it?

Everyone, including him, pursues an easier and easier course. Hate being so weak, he thinks. Emilia: “Okay! So what am I meant to do?”

Emilia yells, having been somewhat excluded from the situation, as she hits her limit.

The mob of Leweses isn't doing anything, but the silent pressure they exert on Emilia isn't sanitary for her mental health.

Subaru crosses his arms as he wonders what to do.

Subaru: “Maybe try pacifying them with an order they can't misinterpret?”

Emilia: “Like? They went so far when I just told them to step away, so I don't know what to...” Subaru: “I think saying 'sit down' would work?”

Emilia: “...Subaru, you're a genius.”

It's nothing that brilliant, thinks Subaru while Emilia asks the Leweses to sit, and they each plonk themselves down on the spot.

It feels like Emilia is the teacher at a kindergarten now that all these little girls are sitting cross-legged around her, but actually the situation is more desperate than that.

They have to come up with some smart way to deal with this. Subaru has some relevant proposals he wants to make when Roswaal returns, so now it's an issue of waiting for him.

Subaru: “Since there's 26 of them, naming them after the letters of the alphabet might work to individuate and remember them all.”

Lewes: “Yer look like yer up ter some nefarious plotting again, Su-bo.”

Subaru: “'Nefarious plotting' makes it sound bad. All I'm doing is working my brain so everyone I know reaches a happy conclusion.”

Subaru gives her a big grin. Lewes sighs, looking astonished.

Did she find his efforts credible or not credible? Subaru decides optimistically that his smile just looked untrustworthy. When Emilia, freed from the swarm of doubles, approaches Subaru and Lewes. Subaru presents her with her teacup.

Subaru: “You did a good job, Emilia-tan. Putting in good efforts as always.”

Emilia: “Thank you. But compared to Garfiel, I'm barely doing anything. Garfiel does such good work, ordering them all whenever it's mealtime...”

Emilia takes a sip and sighs as she looks at the doubles.

The people usually looking after these girls are the representative Lewes, and Garfiel, the other command right holder.

Garfiel especially is tending to the girls with exquisite care, ensuring that none of them starve to death or get stranded, grumbling about it all the way.

He's had far more experience with them for he's been interacting with them throughout his time in SANCTUARY.

Though that's unlikely to console Emilia.

Subaru: “Well, just gotta take it easy. Garfiel's doing some amazing stuff, but I think it'd be nice to have a more advanced solution.”

Emilia: “Advanced solution?”

Subaru: "I'll tell you once Roswaal's back. Until then, care to soothe my mind by freaking out some more in a herd of little girls?"

Emilia: "You are so mean!"

Emilia puffs out her cheeks in indignation, which is adorable.

Either way, his plans are still in the draft stage and thus unready for the public. He'll iron out more of the details before he reveals it and basks in the praise.

Subaru: "Anyway, how about we leave the Lewes double problem for a moment, and get back on topic?"

Lewes: "My answer's still the same. I'm not thinking ter do anything... much ter get them moving. I think they're trying ter keep from worrying me. They act like things're going reasonably well between them whenever I'm erround."

Emilia: "That is so saucy of them..." Subaru: "Who says saucy anymore?"

Subaru averts his gaze to disregard Emilia's glare, and thinks about the wily siblings.

They are equally unwilling to make Lewes worry. And they've figured out how to compensate for it without actually discussing it with each other.

Though they know each other so well, they can't make that last step. The key reason for that has to be—

Subaru: "Yeah, it's because of their mother." Lewes says nothing.

Emilia: "Their mother... you mean, the one who left them behind in SANCTUARY when they were little?"

Subaru: "I've only heard the second-hand story, and I haven't asked about what she was like. Actually no, Frederica told me she was extremely unlucky, but that's about all. I mean I figure it's a given, but you did know her, right, Lewes-san?"

Lewes puts her teacup to her lip, letting the time drag on and on. But this is not enough to escape Subaru and Emilia's focused gazes.

She gives a long sigh, and without looking at the couple,

Lewes: "Their mother, Leashia Tinsel, isn't a topic I particularly want to talk about." Subaru: "So she's someone you'd rather not remember?"

Lewes: "I didn't dislike her 'er nothing. Liked her a lot actually. She had that friendly kind of charisma, and... her circumstances were the unfortunate thing, which you can see since the misfortune didn't kill her. Her household was ruined and she was sold into slavery, then bandits attacked and destroyed the traders. The bandits took her home as their spoils, got her pregnant... it's essentially the picture of misfortune."

Subaru: "—"

Frederica has told him all this before, but it's still a horrible story. Emilia has no words for how heartrending it is. Though that final part of the tale may have eclipsed her understanding.

Lewes: "But Leashia didn't end in misfortune. The bandits took a liking to her so she lived and raised her child. Until another band of bandits destroyed the first one, and they entertained themselves with her again."

Subaru: “Most people wouldn't recover after all that.”

Lewes: “But she did. The bandit group collapsed, she met Roz-bo on her travels and gained his patronage, entrusted Frederica and Gar-bo ter him, then left SANCTUARY ter search fer Gar-bo's dad.”

Subaru: “—She did? Garfiel said he thought his mother abandoned them.”

Lewes: “...Thert's probably his weakness talking. Since there's hope in being abandoned.” Subaru's breath catches at the seemingly inappropriate word: hope.

Where in this tale is there any hope? Before Subaru can figure it out, Emilia lowers her eyes.

Emilia: “She isn't coming back because she abandoned us... means that their mother might still be alive, is that the hope?”

Lewes says nothing.

Emilia: “If she promised that she was leaving for a purpose, but still wasn't coming back... it's too frightening to think about.”

Lewes shakes her head, looking miserable.

Lewes has told them the real reason why their mother left SANCTUARY. And why had Leashia's promise never been kept? —The question lends itself to a horrible answer.

Garfiel has seen his mother's passing. And that fits everything perfectly.

Emilia: “I wonder if they know.”

Lewes: “Leashia left them after Frederica wers old enough ter be self-aware. I doubt she's fergotten it. And Gar-bo... well, who knows.”

Emilia: “I think Garfiel remembers... no, remembered too. Otherwise he wouldn't look so joyful when looking at Subaru.”

It's possible that Emilia's thinking of something different from Subaru, but he figures that the happening in Garfiel's past—his farewell to his mother—has been resolved and reached conclusion. The problem is that Frederica and Garfiel have not secured that closure equally. Frederica might still feel something very deep-rooted about the whole issue.

It does seem like Frederica is the one avoiding Garfiel. That's the impression Subaru gets when thinking back on their exchange.

Subaru: “Incidentally do you know anything about what happened to Leashia-san after that, Lewes-san?”

Lewes: “...I never asked abert it. And that ain't a lie. Sermetimes you just don't want ter know the truth, and so it goes for me.”

Lewes averts her gaze, ignoring the truth that she has likely already grasped. Subaru is not heartless enough to call it weakness.

A ripple crests through the dregs of tea in the teacup on the table.
He watches the wave melt into nothing, a gloomy silence upon the scene.



Subaru: "I'm feeling that if this goes on, everything'll end as us prying further and further into their affairs like a couple of nosy rubberneckers, but how're your feelings on this Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "Uhrm... I-I'd sooo rather avoid doing that."

Subaru and Emilia leave Lewes's room and walk down the hall as they consider their accomplishments, terrified that they may fail to produce any decent results.

They would rather this not end as them uncovering gossip and indulging in rumours. Naturally, their top priority is to improve Frederica and Garfiel's relationship, but it's just life that problems spring up when you're dealing with problems.

Emilia: "But since neither talking to Ram or Lewes-san went anywhere... maybe we're out of options? Since Roswaal isn't back yet either."

Subaru: "If we're assuming that we shouldn't rely on the passive approach of 'it'll resolve itself over time', then we can say that yeah the issue is probably family. But where their mom is... or rather, whatever happened to her after their goodbye, isn't the issue. It's their mental states back then compared to now, and the stances they held when they parted ways."

Emilia: "Wouldn't it be easier to just lock them in a room together?" Subaru: "Here I am in shock at Emilia-tan's unexpectedly barbaric plans." Subaru looks startled, but Emilia looks serious as she puts her finger to her lip. Emilia: "I mean, right?"

Emilia: "I think what they need isn't really time, but a reason to start talking. They've considered so many things over these ten years... so if they get the time

to talk about it, I'm sure they'll manage something.”

Subaru: “Hrnhmhm, but that feels passive too. It's not really any different from the majority opinion of 'it'll resolve itself over time'. When people say 'it'll resolve itself over time', they mean that the conversation you're talking about will naturally occur during that period.”

Emilia: “So why don't we make that conversation happen for them, unnaturally? I know my idea was pretty extreme... but I think it's basically what Ram and Lewes-san are saying. That we just have to leave it to them while they're alone together.”

Emilia lifts her finger from her lip and gives it a wag. Subaru listens to her with his arms crossed and brows crinkled in deliberation.

Is that really all they need to do?

Subaru does understand what she's saying. In fact it makes perfect sense. He's just troubling himself over simple anxieties.

But is it really safe for their involvement to be so shallow? They don't have to pre-arrange things in more detail for this to work out? Nothing will hit any kinks, and needlessly escalate in complexity?

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Nuh.”

When Emilia pokes Subaru in the forehead. She looks up at him, brought back to reality.

Emilia: “I know you're a worrier, and work so hard for everybody's sake...”
Subaru: “You're going to make me blush, saying that...”

Emilia: “But I worry as much about you as you do for us. You need to know that you don't have take everything upon yourself like this. They'll be fine.”

Subaru: “...I suppose.”

With everything dismissed by the word 'worrier', Subaru feels the weight fall from his chest.

The burden in his heart was that kind of intangible boulder—which he had gone shouldering upon himself.

Emilia: “It'd make me happy if you trusted me, and went along with my ideas too sometimes.” Subaru's shoulders untense as he sighs.

Perhaps it's not the conclusion he was after, but it seems like events are going to wind up according with the general consensus of opinion.

Subaru: “Okay. Then we'll figure something out and—”

???: “—Goodness, if it isn't Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama. What are you doing here?” And just when he tries to adopt Emilia's plan, someone intrudes.

A grey-haired young man carrying a massive stack of papers shows up before the two. Recognizing him, Subaru puts his hand to his chin in thought.

Actually, of all the important people in the mansion, there is only one they haven't spoken to due to reasons other than absence.

With that thought, Subaru considers how useful this man will be for tackling the problem, and nods. Subaru: “Okay. Then we'll figure something out and make that happen.”

Man: “Do you mind me asking why it feels as though I don't exist in this conversation!?” The shout from the familiar voice echoes loudly through the Milord Mansion.

Chapter 4: Birth Of The Emilia Faction Internal Affairs Minister

While working away at the massive mountain of paperwork, Otto listens to Subaru and Emilia who sit on the reception sofa.

He withdraws the needed documents from the pile, his quill pen occasionally darting over them. He scribbles formulas on a sheet of paper, does some kind of calculation before jotting them onto the paperwork, and references nearby documents while stamping the first with a seal.

With how smoothly his work progresses and how frantically his eyes move it's questionable whether he's paying attention to Subaru, but his occasional interjections suggest he isn't just ignoring them.

Emilia looks impressed as she watches Otto work, Subaru sitting beside her as he explains what they've been doing. He finishes his speech at nearly the exact same moment that Otto raps his pen into its holder.

Otto: "So you're looking to improve sibling relations, are you? ...Then if you'd like to consult me, I could tell you—"

Subaru: "Where's this going?"

Otto: "You're seeking pertinent advice from someone with siblings, correct? Then I believe that instead of consulting this quagmire of only children, you'd be better off consulting me, what with my elder and younger brother, indeed."

Subaru finds himself overwhelmed by Otto's abounding confidence.

Subaru has never asked about Otto's family make-up, but apparently he's the middle brother in a series of three. So yes, Subaru and Emilia are indeed craving his advice.

However,

Subaru: “But weren't you chased out of your house for being a bad son? It'd be one thing if you had good family relations, but advice from the black sheep isn't exactly helpful.”

Otto: “Who are you implying was so poor a son that their parents disowned them!? I've never spoken even a single word of the like! My elder brother inherited the house, so I as the second eldest left to go trading of my own will! Perhaps it's unexpected, but I do believe myself cleverer than my brothers, you see.”

Subaru: “What if you're the only one thinking that and your family's relieved the parasite's gone?” Otto: “Does it somehow displease you for me to be here!?”

Otto pounds his hands on the desk, his face red. Subaru shakes his head with an, “Of course not.” Merely the thought of Otto being absent is terrifying. It's just that Subaru found himself insulting him before he could thank him.

Which is another one of Otto Swein's characteristic virtues.

Emilia: “But for some reason you feel really undependable, Otto-kun. I wonder why that is? ...Even though you did so much to help.”

Otto: “E-Emilia-sama too...”

Subaru's thoughts express themselves vicariously through Emilia as she puts her hand on her chin, in thought. Apparently she is also a victim of Otto's

virtues.

This man's aura of dependability correlates negatively with his actual capacities. Subaru: “Look at how you're tormenting Emilia-tan, you sinful bastard.”

Otto: “Utterly unjustified! What did I even do!”

Emilia: “So anyway, Otto-kun. I'd really appreciate it if you could tell us what we should do about them.”

Otto: “And right into the topic! Now aren't you two truly just master and servant!”

Otto spends a moment overreacting, before seeming to realise that his hysterics are utterly pointless. The back of his chair squeaks as he puts his hand to his grey hair.

Otto: “Well, I believe the important thing to start with is their mutual feelings. From what I've seen, Garfiel doesn't look to be the problem. His stubbornness is akin to a child's, and I imagine that he'd like to reconcile as he loves his family.”

Emilia: “Mm, I think so too. Garfiel wants to make up. But Frederica's having trouble approaching him.”

Otto: “Frederica-san must be in a somewhat difficult position. She is the elder sibling, so as the superior she needs to let Garfiel have his way if they're to reconcile. But from what I've heard, it doesn't seem that Frederica-san has erred. She may simply be exhibiting her sisterly generosity. If we consider her capacity to tolerate the younger's tantrums as the crux of this affair... what's the matter?”

Subaru stares at Otto as he neatly arranges his argument, and shakes his head when Otto complains.

Subaru: “No, you hit me with a way more serious opinion than I expected, and I'm stuck on where to throw in jokes...”

Otto: “It's a serious matter that deserves serious consideration for a serious conclusion!” Subaru: “Please forgive me. I'm too incompetent to play off your convoluted lead-up...” Otto: “Are you trying to resolve problems or to encourage them!?”

Of course Subaru wants to resolve them, but it hurts to defy his primordial desires. Otto and Subaru's conversation aside, Emilia nods admiringly in reply to Otto.

Emilia: “Then...”

Emilia: “We have to address Frederica's feelings first.”

Otto: “I believe so, yes. It doesn't seem that Frederica-san will exacerbate the situation by deeming Garfiel unpardonable. And honestly, I doubt anything so finnicky will be necessary for this. It's one of those problems that time can res —”

Subaru: “We don't want time to resolve it and that's why we're trying to hurry it along. Did you even listen to me all the way to the end? I swear.”

Otto: “I shouldn't have to be hearing this!”

Sensing that Otto is reaching the exact same conclusion as everyone else, Subaru snorts somewhat mockingly. Otto is indignant, and Subaru harries him further with,

Subaru: “So where would you show off that older sibling magnanimity, if it were you? You mentioned a younger brother, so surely you've had a fight where you showcased your broad-mindedness. That's the tale I wanna see, hear, sing.”

Otto: “If you'll pardon me on the seeing and singing, yes, a tale. Honestly, my family was rather harmonious. My siblings were good people, my parents were kind, and... hold on, have we ever actually fought bef...”

Subaru: “Useless!!”

Otto: “Wh-why on earth are you saying that! What is so wrong about a peaceful family! Are you suggesting that relationships are illegitimate if they never once involve fights? That's ridiculous! What is there to complain about peaceful relationships with no great flaws!”

Subaru: “Well it's the worst card you could've played in this situation!”

Just when it seems like Otto's going to come up with something poignant and useful, he plays a zero.

Seeing that Otto can counterbalance even Subaru's ridiculousness, he probably never got so enraged that he started slinging curses and insults around pertaining to issues of family.

Or perhaps everyone in the Swein family shares the same bullyable temperament as Otto. A home where life was peaceful, but only because no

tormentors were around in the empty Eden.

Subaru: "This poor, sheltered young lad..."

Otto: "It feels like you are insulting me immensely but perhaps that's just my imagination!" Emilia: "...Huhuhu."

Otto yells at Subaru, who lets his imagination spread its wings. When Emilia, watching the exchange, puts her hand to her mouth as she fails to suppress a smile.

The two men fix their gaze on Emilia. She shakes her head.

Emilia: "No, I'm sorry. It's just that you look like you're getting along sooo well... kind of like brothers."

Otto: "I'm rather sure that my brothers were kinder to me than this..."

Subaru: "Don't say that, big bro. We always treated you like this, brother, you just didn't realise. Face the reality, my brother."

Otto: "Oh shut up!"

Otto has already exhausted the words and willpower needed to reply. Subaru pouts at him as he incessantly continues, "Brother mine, dear brother, broham, broski, bub-bub, broseph, Esteemed Brother My Elder," and so on. Emilia gives a clap of her hands.

Emilia: "Ah. What do you two always do when you reconcile? I think Otto-kun always concedes, but figuring this out might bring us closer to the answer."

Subaru: "It's amazing how naturally that turned into Otto always conceding."
Emilia: "What if you try letting him win, Subaru?"

Subaru: "I... even supposing I yield to everyone else in the world... am absolutely never, ever yielding to Otto...!"

Otto: "Oh shut up!"

Barks Otto at Subaru's atrocious little drama, rubbing at his temples as he thinks. It seems like he is seriously considering Emilia's idea.

Otto: "Eerhm, what do I do when I argue with Natsuki-san, hrm..." Subaru: "Give up usually!"

Otto: "The answer didn't even bear thinking and now even I'm wondering what I'm doing!"

Otto cradles his head atop the desk as Emilia stands up and pats him consolingly. While jealous about Emilia's kindness, Subaru judges that he won't be able to get it himself in this scene and bats at his lap before standing up.

Subaru: "Well, that did help. We'll try Frederica first, and depending how that goes we'll judge how we'll enact Emilia's plan."

Otto: "You realise that this is merely you fussing, and you may be breaking your back for no reason?"

Subaru: "I still think it's a lot better than actually breaking your back. You disagree?" Otto: "—Haah..."

Otto gives a resigned sigh.

The way his mouth relaxes into a smile is essential his answer to the question.

Emilia must also perceive the same thing as Subaru in Otto's expression. She stretches easily on the spot, and gives Otto a smile.

Emilia: "Well, Subaru and I'll be going now. I'm sorry we interrupted you when you were so busy."

Otto: "No no no, I'm the one who invited you. Also I am surrounded by suffocating mountains of paperwork. The occasional breather helps to make it easi..."

Otto's expression snaps into awareness.

Otto: "Hold on, why am I working so frantically on Margrave Mathers's feudal paperworks? At some point I get asked to assist with some municipal tasks, and then am permitted to inspect even the territory's administrative logs... I'm sure I was only trying to secure a quote for the prices of that oil..."

Subaru: "Oops, Emilia-tan. We stay any longer and we'll be impeding Otto's work. Let us vacate the room while happily holding hands!"

Emilia: "Huh? Oh, erm, yes let's."

Otto puts his hand to his forehead, beginning to feel bewildered about his current circumstances when Subaru and Emilia abandon him. Subaru takes advantage of the moment to grab Emilia's hand and exits OTTO'S OFFICE. And just when Subaru attempts to flee the room, his hand on the door,

Otto: “Oh, Natsuki-san—”

Subaru: “Hm? What. Just relax. You're not sitting there because of any mistake or hypnotism or powerful suggestion. You have merely been beguiled by circumstances, conversational finesse, and...”

Subaru's sentence cuts off halfway.

He cannot keep joking for he senses something grave in Otto's gaze as he looks at Subaru. As though he is trying to talk about something important.

Subaru shuts his mouth, and Emilia tilts her head. Otto looks at the two while a mere microsecond of hesitation flashes through him.

But it all disperses when Emilia glances back. Otto: “—No, nevermind.”

Subaru: “Come on, I'm curious now. If you're gonna say something then say it.”

Otto: “I would like to say it, but... well, we'll say that presently it would be like trying to hold a cloud. We'll discuss it once things begin to look more hopeful. Since I cannot tell yet whether it would help you or just bring you unease.”

Otto scratches his head as he explains his hesitation.

Subaru tries to make Otto change his mind by silently staring at him, but he just seats himself and retrieves his quill.

Otto: “I'll be returning to my work, so I leave Garfiel's case to you. When the military cabinets are not functioning properly, the civil cabinets in the back are too anxious to work.”

Subaru: “—Got it. But when you can say whatever that was, do, Minister of

Internal Affairs.” Otto: “Why of course I w... civil, cabinet? Minister of Internal Affairs?”

Subaru: “Let's go, Emilia-tan. We'll just be bothering him if we stay any longer!”

Leaving Otto behind as he begins troubling over the change in his position yet again, Subaru hurriedly pulls Emilia along by the hand and leaves the room.

Emilia's eyes dart about in confusion, and she glances back at Otto the moment before the door closes.

Emilia: “Ah, um, erm, Otto-kun, good luck with your work!”

Unclear whether she's worried for him or giving him a boot in the ass, Emilia calls out to Otto as she leaves the room.

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Having left Otto's Office, Subaru and Emilia's course of action grows more definite. Or really they already had a defined course when the foreign element called 'Otto's opinions' butted in, and now they're moving ahead with a plan just as definite as before.

Subaru: “Thinking about it, that was a complete waste of time...”

Emilia: “Don't say that. Otto-kun's story was, erm, well, it was... mhm, ah, erm, yes... it helped?” Subaru: “Your unmaskable honesty shows in that question mark and it's adorable.”

Emilia fails in her desperate attempts to back up Otto as Subaru praises her and focuses on searching for Frederica.

Anyway, the problem with the siblings is the sister. Garfiel's already made up his mind. Now is just to give Frederica impetus to make up hers, then—

???: “My, if it isn't Emily and Subaru. May I ask what you are doing?” Subaru: “Ueg.”

Emilia: “Ah.”

A voice calls from behind them. Subaru's breath hitches awkwardly to a stop, and Emilia plainly shows her surprises as she glances back.

Their gazes land on a girl in a dress with her navy hair in a braid.

She is less than ten years old, even younger than Petra or Beatrice. She's identical to Beatrice in that she wears an extravagant dress, but hers is decorated more simply than the pigtailed girl. Unfitting to her youth, her eyes are stern and her face is dignified.

This girl's name is Anne-Rose Milord.

She is scion of the Milord family which is looking after Subaru's group, currently acting as lord of

the manor in the true lord's absence, and the one receiving Subaru and the others.

While Clind and the other excellent members of this household attend to arrangements and the like, Anne-Rose is the one giving the orders, and she is suitably bold in her bearing.

A statesman's condescending mien—in the form of a child.

This is the Milord family of sorcerers, split from the main household of the Mathers family what belongs to Roswaal. Anne-Rose already has all the

backbone needed to inherit this house.

Lovable childishness—is something she lacks, which is seemingly why Subaru has trouble with her. It feels like, when he's facing her as another individual human being, he is being far eclipsed in refinement by a girl about ten years his junior.

But regardless of all that, Emilia's reaction is very clear.

Emilia: “Augh, Anne. How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not Emily, I'm Emilia.”

Anne: “Why do forgive me, Emily. Though you are at fault here for hesitating in your speech when you first introduced yourself. I find Emily an easier and cuter name than Emilia.”

Emilia: “Really? I mean, I don't really mind it either, but... I guess there's no choice.” And with that, Emilia permits Anne-Rose to use this nickname.

Emilia has got along strangely well with Anne-Rose since they met. Ask why, and they weirdly seem to just suit each other.

Anne-Rose's sentiments seem similar to Emilia's, as she displays not the slightest negativity even around the half-elf. She could be counterbalancing it with her mental capacities, but that in itself presents a problem when considering Emilia's age.

Anne: “Now what is it you're doing with Subaru, Emily? Having a tryst?”

Subaru: “Ah, does it look like one? Does it? Well oh dear, we've gotten so close that it looks like a tryst. You're allowed to blush when the shyness takes you, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: "No, that's not what we're doing at all. All we're doing together is some nefarious plotting." Subaru: "You know exactly how I feel and you just cast it aside, geez!"

Anne-Rose looks extremely interested as she asks her question, and Emilia easily shakes her head in reply. It appears that Anne-Rose hadn't been expecting especially anything, for she looks condescendingly at Subaru with an, "I see," and breathes a sigh.

Her eyes are definitely mocking Subaru's ineffectiveness. But Subaru can't see himself as being at fault. He has constantly been flirting at Emilia, and she's just gotten better at ignoring it.

Anne: "I shall inquire into your nefarious schemes later, for have you seen Clind anywhere? I need him and he is utterly missing."

Emilia: "Clind-san was watching over Petra and Beatrice just a moment ago."
Anne: "...Phrasing truly is the crux of matters, Emily."

Anne-Rose grimaces, seeming to infer everything from that statement alone. She's known Clind for a long time, so she must know full well his disposition. After all, his tenacious LOLI SOUL is usually fixed entirely on his master, Anne-Rose. There's no need to inquire about his resilience or keenness or hopelessness.

Emilia: "He said he bought sweets for them, so they should eat. I wonder if he bought any for me. It's kind of sooo bugging me."

Anne: "...I doubt that Clind would be so impolite, so surely there are some for you. He already visited myself and presented me with tea as well."

Emilia: "Ah, did he? I'm so excited."

Emilia clasps her hands together in joy while Anne-Rose pleasantly watches.

They are in the complete opposite positions to their heights and ages. It is a heartwarming scene, but Subaru has to tilt his head.

When Anne-Rose notices him doing this, and narrows her blue eyes.

Anne: "You seem to have time available, so I'm sure you wouldn't mind. Would you care to accompany me for a request of mine?"

Subaru: "Hey now. We might look like we have free time, but we actually don't. What's actually happening with this apparent free time is that we're using this period to substantiate a definite course into doing something productive for abating future troubles which..."

Emilia: "What's your request? I don't mind so long as it's something I can help with."

While Subaru starts spinning the long-winded excuses, Emilia thoughtlessly accepts. Anne-Rose gives Emilia a smile, looking at the pair with eyes so mature they could not conceivably be a nine-year-old's.

Anne: "There is a man of whom I would like to shock, and a maid of whom I have long known who I would like to conciliate."

Chapter 5: Anne-Rose's Trap & Brother-Sister Relations

Why are they readily going along with the nefarious plots of a nine year old?

Subaru watches the back of the small girl leading them down the hallway, annoyed at his own failure to prevent this.

—Anne-Rose Milord.

Being from a branch of the Mathers household that Roswaal heads, she shares many distinct characteristics with him. Such as her notably navy hair and blue eyes.

Her hair is in a crown braid, but since Subaru doesn't know what the hairstyle is called, he mentally refers to her as Braid Loli.

She possesses a keen intelligence unfitting for a nine year old. Her cleverness and wits do make her seem a relative of Roswaal's, but the thing most reminiscent of Roswaal shows through:

Anne: “Emily, would you care to hold my hand?” Emilia: “Huh? Oh, sure, Anne.”

Anne: “So I oblige. Also, Emily. Would you care to let me hug you?” Emilia: “Huh? Oh, sure, Anne.”

Anne: “So I oblige. Also, Emily. Would you care to carry me in your ar—”
Subaru: “Enough.”

Subaru gets Anne-Rose, seeking hand-holding and hugs and upsy-daisies, away from Emilia. Emilia's eyes widen. Anne-Rose brushes off her lap, undeterred, before exaggeratedly patting at her shoulders where Subaru

touched her.

Anne: “How brutishly you separate people who desire to touch one another, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Where'd you get those statistics? Questionnaire looked to be about walking the Milord estate alone to me.”

Anne: “Your limited your stature must be, Subaru, if you are unable to overlook a child's endearing mischievousness.”

Subaru: “Except I would've kept my mouth shut if it was just childish mischief!”

Anne-Rose coolly attempts to justify her actions. Despite her words, she is still trying to grasp Emilia's hand whenever the opportunity appears, so Subaru can't get careless.

Anne-Rose is a blood relative of Roswaal's, a prodigy beyond her nine years. And her idiosyncrasy is—for some reason, she likes Emilia way too much.

Ever since the day that the group came to stay in this mansion and they introduced themselves, Anne-Rose has shown inordinate fondness for Emilia. Emilia is a gullible airhead so she may view it as a cute show of affection, but Subaru views it otherwise.

After all, she's related to Roswaal. While his Demihuman Fancy has been overthrown by his actual Echidna Fancy, it may not be the same for his relative.

Many of the servants in the Milord household are demihumans. Ones that Roswaal assembled from all over his lands who have apparently suffered persecution, and are effectively taking asylum in the Milord residence by Roswaal's will.

Considering that Anne-Rose was born and raised in this environment, demihumans are a familiar presence for her. So, while she isn't prejudiced against Emilia the half-elf, her friendliness is excessive.

Put simply, Subaru is trying to keep Anne-Rose from stealing Emilia. And Anne-Rose is trying to keep Subaru from monopolizing Emilia. Making them rivals for Emilia's affections.

Although,

Emilia: “Come on, Subaru. I don't know what's rankling you, but you can't be mad at Anne like this when she's still so little. You're being immature.”

Subaru: “Who says rankling anymore? ...No I mean, nevermind that, look Emilia-tan. Plainly said, Anne-Rose's gaze isn't the kind you can dismiss as her still being young and...”

Emilia: “No excuses! I'm so sorry, Anne. I think Subaru's still flustered from being in someone else's mansion.”

Subaru: “...and it still applies even when you act like I can't settle into unfamiliar beds!”

Subaru and Emilia have disparate stances toward Anne-Rose, so whenever the topic gets onto how they feel about her, it turns into one of these fruitless arguments.

Why can't Emilia notice how cloying Anne-Rose's gaze is?

Subaru: "I bet that it's one of those things where only people aiming for Emilia-tan's affections can notice when others are doing the same yes that's definitely it!"

Anne: "Emily. Subaru has just confessed that he lusts for you. How indecent."
Subaru: "Your word choice's the indecent thing here! How are you only nine!?"

While Beatrice is only superficially offensive, Anne-Rose actually is offensive. Subaru could dismiss that 'indecent' as a simple riposte, supposing it came from Beatrice's mouth, but somehow it feels like a real insult when Anne-Rose says it.

Emilia: "How come you two can't get along? It's sooo baffling..." Subaru: "It's because we both l..."

Emilia: "You both?" Subaru: "—Mhn, nh."

Emilia tilts her head. Subaru cannot get the rest of the sentence out.

He's stated his fondness for her countless times, but voicing it around other people makes it feel cheap. Also he's saying it unintentionally while running off momentum, which makes it both cheap and embarrassing.

In the corner of his eye, Anne-Rose smiles victoriously.

Anne: "Now then, I will refrain from teasing Subaru further. For let us speak inside my room, which we have reached."

Says Anne-Rose to pure Emilia and red-faced Subaru.

Abruptly, Subaru realises that they have walked down the whole of the hallway, and indeed stand before an overly ornate door. It's Anne-Rose's room. Apparently Emilia has been invited here many times before, but this is Subaru's first venture here.

Anne-Rose takes Emilia's hand and easily moves to welcome her into the room. But Subaru intervenes and pulls the breaks on that.

Subaru: "Wait. 'Anne-Rose's room' is such a fishy series of words so I'm going in first." Anne: "—Huu. Very well, proceed. You are free to do what you wish."

While she does seem bothered at first, Anne-Rose concedes to Subaru with a sigh. Subaru puts his hand to the doorknob and, slightly tense, enters the room. Where,

Clind: "I have been awaiting your presence, Natsuki-sama. Tea and biscuits have been prepared. Please do find yourself a seat and relax. Powwow."

Clind welcomes him with a formal bow.

Stunned speechless, Subaru glances back, to see that Anne-Rose looks utterly unfazed. Emilia: "Huh, Clind-san? But I thought you left to go eat with Beatrice and Petra?"

Clind: "So I did, Emilia-sama. However, it appeared that the Mistress found it in her mind to hold a tea party in her room, and thusly, I attended to those preparations. Urgency."

Emilia: "You're right, Anne did say something like that." Clind: "Indeed, the Mistress so thought of me. Perceptiveness."

Emilia peeks her head out from beside the frozen Subaru as she speaks with Clind. But it seems their conversation doesn't quite mesh.

It's almost like Clind said 'thought of me' instead of 'asked of me'.

Anne: "It shall drive you to lunacy, should you attempt to rationally comprehend Clind's peculiarities. It is best for the mind that you simply accept

it.”

Clind: “I am always vigilant to remain one step ahead of my summons. Objective.” How the hell does vigilance achieve that.

...Is what Subaru's thinking, but Anne-Rose and Emilia seem unbothered as they start taking their seats. While mentally tilting his head, Subaru joins the tea party too.

Anne: “Seeing that Clind has prepared the tea, we may proceed with our conversation.”

Clind: “The one regarding the bettering of Frederica and Garfiel-sama's relationship. Conciliation.” Subaru: “Clind-san, are you one of those butlers where there's actually several of you?”

Clind: “That position has already been filled by Lewes-sama. Rehash.”

Clind seems to think that his inclusion in the conversation will just stymie it. He readies tea and biscuits for everyone, before going to a corner of the room where he stands as still as a statue. His gaze locks onto Anne-Rose, but she ignores it, long used to it.

Anne: “Now, Clind's assessment is correct, this regards our mutual interest in swiftly bettering Frederica and Garfiel's relationship... would be a valid thought?”

Emilia: “Yes, that's right. We've been racking our brains trying to do something, but we haven't really come up with any wonderful ideas. It's been a real kerfuffle.”

Anne: “You're adorable when you're stressed, Emily. —Then, now that you have ventured about the mansion to discuss the issue, and found yourselves at

a standstill, you have come to me.”

Subaru: “Stop subliminally throwing your ulterior motives in there.” Anne-Rose, nonchalant, looks utterly unaffected by Subaru's jab.

Either way, she seems to understand Subaru and Emilia's situation, which saves on the exposition.

Subaru: “But anyway, you're looking to have them make up too? What's the occasion? Everyone else just insisted to let time resolve it.”

Anne: “Perhaps because I am less inclined to resignation, and less accustomed to waiting? I must say that the people you spoke to are largely of that disposition.”

Subaru: “Frank, aren't you. ...No but, we also asked Otto.” Anne: “Then I amend that to include those ignorant to success.” Subaru: “Harsh!”

And how sad Otto is that Anne-Rose has managed to get this impression of him, when they've only known each other a week.

But it's best that Subaru keep silent, considering that he can't refute her.

Anne: “I cannot deny that time will resolve the issue. A divide of ten years separates them... given another decade, the issue shall resolve itself. But that is far too protracted. Why, ten years, that's the same length of time since my Mother and Father last kissed!”

Subaru: “gggggggn?”

Halfway through an unchildlike screed, she abruptly hits a childlike conclusion.

Subaru groans, unable to keep up with the sudden shift in gears, prompting Clind to put his finger to his mouth in request of silence.

Subaru doesn't have a complete grasp of the situation, but perhaps her knowledge in those topics actually is that of a nine-year-old. Though he'd rather not probe into it, since Emilia is right here and also under the exact same misapprehension.

Anne: "Care to explain that bizarre groaning of yours, Subaru?"

Subaru: "It's nothing. Just some phlegm and despondency stuck in my throat."

Anne: "I see. What tribulations puberty brings. ...Regardless, I have no intentions of making them wait for a decade."

Emilia: "We're thinking the same way. But, do you have any ideas, Anne?"

Anne: "What were your thoughts on the issue, Emily?"

It's replying to a question with a question, but regardless Emilia furrows her pretty brows and puts her finger to her lips.

Emilia: "Erm..."

Emilia: "I think they do want to make up. I feels like Garfiel's trying to make time so they can talk, and though Frederica's uncomfortable, I think she does want to talk."

Anne: "I see, understood. And so?"

Emilia: "And so I've been wondering if it'd be easier to just lock them in a

room together.” Subaru: “Sure are going for the barbaric plans, huh, Emilia-tan!?”

While Subaru has no better ideas, it's shocking to hear it coming from Emilia's mouth. Also he does endorse the idea, but there are some questions to be had with it. Particularly,

Subaru: “I mean we could throw them in a room, but those two can bust out of basically any room when working together. I'd prefer we didn't destroy half the mansion doing this. So instead of a busted mansion we have a week to get them hanging out together, what is this, a speedrun?”

Emilia: “Then what should we do, Subaru? Should I use ice to make a room that we can lock them in?”

Subaru: “I don't think we need to use such extreme conditions to revive their family love, no! Just, look! Something like, have them go into a room while sharing the exact same goal!”

Emilia: “The same goal...?” Emilia tilts her head, puzzled.

Subaru manages to get away from any criminal ideas, but his proposition doesn't go any further than that.

He's conceived of making them share a goal, but has no concrete idea of what it would be. Should

they defeat some monster that they can only take on together? Where exactly are they going to find such a convenient monster?

Anne: “In truth, my thoughts are identical to Subaru's.”

Subaru: “Huh? You know where to hire Cyclopes and Chimeras?” Anne: “Nevermind.”

Anne-Rose gazes scornfully at Subaru, who apologizes by poking out his tongue and donking his head.

The nine-year old sighs while Emilia's cheeks grow flush, eyes lit with expectation.

Anne: "We share the same thoughts, when it pertains to making them share a goal. But I expect that what we know about them differs, and so differs the ideas we conceive, Emily."

Emilia: "What we know about them?"

Anne: "For you have greater knowledge of Garfiel than Frederica. While I have known Frederica for surpassing eight years. That fanged face has been familiar to me ever since I've been aware."

Subaru more or less understands what Anne-Rose is trying to say.

Her relationship with Frederica means that she can supply the information needed to fill the gaping hole that Subaru couldn't address—that is, what common points could lead to a common goal between Frederica and Garfiel.

Subaru: "You're sure this'll work?"

Anne: "Provided that I may secure helpers, yes. Now, Frederica presents no issue, but Garfiel does." Subaru: "Garfiel does?"

Anne: "Should Garfiel's personality be exactly what I have observed over this handful of days, then we should see no issues."

Subaru doesn't know how intensively Anne-Rose has paid attention to

Garfiel's attitude, but as far as he can tell, Garfiel's been entirely himself during his stay here.

He isn't being pointlessly stubborn like he was in SANCTUARY, or trying to hide his fourteen-year- old immaturity. Subaru can assure that much.

Subaru: "Garfiel's being entirely genuine, so no issues there."

Anne: "Excellent. Next is the issue of helpers... perhaps we might enlist help from Lewes-san, their family."

Subaru: "From Lewes-san?"

She's who you'd name first if listing people most related to them.

But she didn't seem entirely cooperative, and it's unknown whether she'll entertain this. Regardless, Anne-Rose seems to think otherwise, and gestures her butler over.

Anne: "Clind."

Clind: "We may delay preparations for this evening's dinner by two hours and use the kitchen. Proposal."

Anne: "I see. Very well. Do inform whoever's tending to dinner of that." Clind: "As you command, I swiftly shall. Haste."

After that quick exchange, Clind silently exits the room. Subaru and Emilia watch on in surprise while Anne-Rose takes a sip of her tea, smiling.

Anne: "Now, let us see this issue quickly done away with. For others yet remain who must be tended to."

She says, plunging Subaru and Emilia deeper into confusion.

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The second that Garfiel enters the kitchen and spots that UNFAMILIAR STATURE, he sighs, recognizing that he's been caught in a trap.

Garfiel: "...Fuckin' everyone's gettin' so over fuckin' involved." Despite his cursing, a smile arises on his face.

Garfiel's nose is custom-made. His sense of smell is so strong that it bares no comparison to the average man's, and he caught the scent before he even entered the room.

That he nevertheless kept himself unaware is Garfiel's final speck of stubbornness, or perhaps his pride as a man.

???: "Garf?"

Garfiel scratches his head while the woman glances back, and calls to him in unfamiliar voice. Before Garfiel stands a woman with long, lustrous blonde hair. She is taller than him, and her build is assuredly robust. The horde of fangs decorating her mouth, combined with her powerful frame, makes her seem somewhat savage and violent.

Were it not for her gentle voice and the tender gleam in her eyes, people would constantly be getting the entirely wrong impression of her.

Frederica Baumann. Is how she's been introducing herself, or so Garfiel Tinsel hears. Tinsel is the name of their mother, and Baumann that of her father.

Garfiel doesn't know why Frederica insists on using her father's surname, and has opted not to think about it.

He doubts that those who devised this meeting took those complicated sentiments into account. Or perhaps Garfiel is just exaggerating the whole thing, and to outsiders it doesn't look like a big issue.

Garfiel: “Ain't often I see ya here, Sis.”

Frederica: “And I could say the same. To think that you would find yourself here... dinner has not yet been prepared, you will find nothing here to pilfer.”

Garfiel: “I ain't here fer food. Stop treatin' me like a damn kid.”

Frederica: “But is it not childishness to balk when treated as a child? And I suspect that you are still young enough that you would desire such babying, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Nah, 'm fourteen 'm over that hump. Who th'fuck's a baby here!?”
Feeling pricked, Garfiel howls in rejection.

Frederica shakes her head at Garfiel's overreaction and returns her gaze to the front—to look into the kitchen.

Frederica: “I'm occupied with a task at the moment. Garf, I cannot devote all of my time to relaxation as you can.”

Garfiel: “Ain't like I'm spendin' all my amazin' time playin' 'round either. And I ain't here t'kill time. ...Think 'm here fer th'same reason 's you, Sis.”

Frederica: “The same reason?”

Garfiel: "Looks like yer got asked by someone else tho." By those words alone, Frederica seems to figure it out.

Frederica: "So that's it,"

she mutters in comprehension.

Frederica: "I did think it peculiar. Out of nowhere, Anne-Rose-sama began saying that she would die should she not have one of my meat pies."

Garfiel: "How th'hell did that manage t'trick you, Sis."

Frederica: "What did they say... no, what did Grandmother say that brought you here?" Garfiel: "Sh'said if she ain't gettin' one'v my amazin' meat pies she's gonna go more senile." Frederica: "I also must wonder how you managed to find credibility in that statement."

Garfiel shuts his mouth.

Hearing her say it does make him question it, but he had been sincerely worried so there's nothing to do.

Garfiel: "Well maybe y'just can't understand seein' as yer gave up on lookin' after her. Ain't weird t'all fer 'er t'show up askin' 'f dinner's ready yet even after sh'just ate. 'Course I'd fuckin' worry."

It's actually a sad misunderstanding coming from the fact that, when the Lewes personality changes

her rotation to the next one, the new Lewes doesn't inherit memories so extensively as to discern whether dinner happened or not. But Garfiel will never notice that and neither will Frederica. The siblings' concern for Lewes's mental health compounds.

However, Garfiel's statement pricks Frederica in a different manner than described. Because, although unintentionally, he struck on the issue of her decade-long absence.

Frederica: "...Indeed. I never returned to SANCTUARY even once over that decade. And you're the one who protected SANCTUARY during that period. ...I have no right to speak as if I know what happened there, or what has come of Grandmother."

Garfiel: "No, I... that ain't what I was meanin' t'say with that. I w's just..."
Frederica: "—"

Frederica glances back, forcing Garfiel to face her again. Her face remains unfamiliar.

It's been a decade. During all that time, Garfiel's mental image of his sister remained constant from ten years ago.

Even though he's had this reunion and spent some time with her, he is having trouble accepting it. And the situation's the same for Frederica. She must be viewing him with trepidation, just as he views her.

But it bothers Garfiel. Why is her trepidation casting waves as intense as his own? What was it that he made her feel?

Garfiel: "...Oh."

With that gaze upon him, Garfiel breathes a sigh. The answer thunks into his heart.

Got it.

Crap, he got it. He knows exactly what the emotion in Frederica's eyes mirrors.

It's the same look that Lewes would occasionally have, back in SANCTUARY. The same look that Garfiel would see on his own face, reflected upon the water.

Which means that it's melancholy. Combined with apology. Garfiel: "'Course it'd be."

Garfiel had assumed that the events from ten years ago had been resolved.

Inside the tomb, he remembered the goodbye with his mother from when he was young. He now understood what his mother felt as she left them, and that resolved the issue for Garfiel.

He assumed it had been equally resolved for Frederica.

But it's not.

What happened in the tomb only affected Garfiel.

Garfiel came to understand his feelings for his sister, and his mother's love. He never told or

informed his sister of them, distant as she was.

And so Frederica gazes at Garfiel without any resolution to what happened a decade ago, unsure of what to say.

Even though she has matured, her gaze is identical to what it was ten years ago. Garfiel: "Sister."1

Frederica: "—!"

Garfiel: "'M sorry I didn't say anything. But 's okay. 'M okay. I know what

happened with mom, and with you.”

Frederica: “Garf...”

Frederica's eyes grow teary and wet in the wake of the violent emotion.

What should he say? While frustrated at himself for his lack of eloquence, Garfiel searches for the words that will convey his feelings accurately.

He searches his head, and all the books he has ever read, for the words he must say.

Garfiel: “I get why you left SANCTUARY, and why you never came back after that... ain't what I'cn actually say but, I am trying t'get it. So it's... well, y'know...”

Frederica: “You are... ready to forgive Mother?” Garfiel: “—What's there t'forgive?”

Garfiel's mouth relaxes into a smile as he replies to Frederica with a shake of his head.

Exactly. What's there to forgive?

The love and hatred that Garfiel kept in his heart this whole time had been misaimed. He knew nothing of the truth, didn't even know his own feelings, lashing out in anger at the impenetrable darkness—all a tantrum and nothing more.

Now that he knows the truth, it's all insignificant. There was nothing to forgive or resent.

Garfiel: "I know now that mom loved me... that she loved us." Frederica: "—"

Garfiel: "So there ain't no point tryin't'keep me 'way from what happened. Ain't got nothin' t'do with my amazin' self. So how 'bout we get t'talkin' 'bout somethin' a li'l less crap, Sis?"

Garfiel's speech pattern returns to normal as he rubs his reddened nose. Frederica give a long, deep sigh. She wipes the tears from her eyes.

Frederica: "Garf... you truly have grown."

1 Nee-chan

Garfiel: "Fuckin' sarcasm! I ain't grown a damn inch compar'd t'you! The hell happened t'yer! How'd you get so damn—ghhhah!?"

Frederica: "We may be family, but that is no excuse to say such things to women, Garf you idiot."

Frederica grabs him by the leg and slams him to the ground, the back of his head banging against the floor.

Garfiel's eyes spin as he stares up at the ceiling, Frederica standing in his view above him. Her face is back to a smile.

Frederica: "Come now, stand up."

Garfiel: "Yer th'one who fuckin' flipped me over." Garfiel takes her offered hand. Gets back to his feet.

He lightly brushes himself off and peers over at the counter that Frederica had been using. Garfiel: "So? How far yer got with yer meat pie, Sis?"

Frederica: “I have gathered the ingredients and had just begun to chop them. Though, it impresses me that you remember how to make it, considering that you only ate it when you were young.”

Garfiel: “'S 'cause some persnicket left th'recipie behind so I could make it after she left. 'Kay, my amazing self'll knead the dough.”

Frederica: “Then I will do the chopping.”

Garfiel stands before the ingredients as he wraps a towel around his head, prepared. Frederica brings out the cooking utensils for him as he does so, smoothly passing them over to him.

The siblings begin working in conjunction, no decade-long divide in sight, as they easily attend to the familiar work together.

Chapter 6: Just One More Left

Subaru: “But seriously I wonder if it'll work out...”

Emilia: “Really? But I thought our plan was sooo good. I bet Anne and Lewes-san's acting totally fooled Garfiel and Frederica.”

Subaru: “You sure? ...Honestly I found Lewes-san's hamminess and Anne-Rose's last-second stage fright absolutely shocking.”

Anne: “Silence yourself, Subaru.”

The three of them sit at the dining table, waiting to see how their plan worked out, when Anne-Rose interjects on Subaru's musings. Her cheeks burn bright red in embarrassment, which makes her look her age for once.

Anne-Rose's plan to remedy their sibling relations was extremely simple.

The topic was Emilia's proposal, combined with the part that Subaru couldn't figure out—that is, how to throw Garfiel and Frederica in the same room while sharing the same goal.

Anne-Rose utilized a memory shared between the two of them to easily overcome the issue.

These meat pies that Frederica occasionally cooked had been her speciality ever since her time in SANCTUARY. They couldn't be certain that Garfiel also knew how to make them, but,

Anne: “Frederica often mentioned it. That her Grandmother taught her how

to cook this, and how she remembers that her Mother cooked it for her. Naturally, Garfiel must have also been raised on this cooking, and I believed it highly likely that he inherited the recipe from Lewes-san. From what I've seen, Garfiel is something of a nanna's boy.”

Subaru: “I've got nothing against all that. My issue's not with how you insightfully figured this out.” Anne: “Hrmp.”

Anne-Rose puffs out her cheeks, but Subaru won't let that erase her mistake.

They managed to successfully catch Frederica and give her an excuse to get her in the kitchen without any problems. The issue is how they dispelled Frederica's suspicion and the motive they gave her.

Subaru: “It's with this affliction where you die without pies. Apologize to the pie.”

Anne: “It was merely a slip of the tongue. There is nothing that necessitates me to apologize to...” Emilia: “He's right, I'm kinda unsure about that too. Okay, I'll apologize with you.”

Anne: “I-I suppose I have no choice! When Emily says so I suppose I have no choice!”

Anne-Rose's face flashes bright red as she readily agrees with Emilia.

Subaru averts his gaze from the charming yuri and looks at Lewes, who sits meekly at the table. Subaru: “Lewes-san, looks like you're feeling some guilt that you snagged Garfiel in your trap so perfectly.”

Lewes: “Erv course not... nononono, wait! Explain that, that phrasing yer using to erksacerbate my guilt. Yer quit that, that stuff pains the heart.”

Subaru's mean-spirited statement does bring back some of Lewes's usual attitude. Then she notices that Subaru had said what he did to energize her, and,

Lewes: "So late, after so much has happened. I'm still not sure if I'm glad I did that. I do want them to reconcile, eventually. But..."

Subaru: "You don't have to worry yourself over it. They would've wound up the same as ever saying we just left them to themselves. So the outcome stays the same. All we did is make said constant outcome happen a little earlier. ...I think it's best that things happen sooner when they can."

Lewes: "Why's that?"

Subaru: "Otherwise it's a waste of time when you could be having fun. Humans are certain to die, so we better take action while we still have sand in our hourglass, right?"

Lewes: "—"

Lewes's eyes widen, and she gives a powerless sigh.

Lewes: "You're one of those, aren't you, Subaru. A guy who doesn't second-guess his life principles for a second."

Subaru: "Nope, that's not it. You barely get anyone who gets stuck second-guessing minuscule things the way I do. I just try not to ruminate over it by

telling myself that it's okay not to, and I'm hoping to stick to that precept.”

Lewes: “It's okay, nert ter ruminate.”

Subaru: “Yeah. We have people we want reconciled, and the reconciliation makes everyone happy. So it's fine not to ruminate, let's get them reconciled. When there's someone you wanna be with, save the worrying for later and go over to them with an 'EMT!'. Is what I've been considering lately.”

Though of course, he can't apply it to everything.

Subaru truly is a weak person who agonizes needlessly over trivial things. While having limited time and only a handful of available choices.

He would at least like remove his second-guessing about the choices he does make.

Lewes: “Yer right. When yer get old as me, yer've got so many things ter teach and ter learn it's overwhelming. Doubt I wouldder thought anything like this if I stayed in SANCTUARY ter my end.”

Subaru: “You don't usually get bored of being alive when you live life. But I expect everyone's figured that one out without my input?”

Lewes: “Then I gerrss I better enjoy myself in my limited time, too. I'll start by getting excited fer my cute grandchildren ter make up, and come looking fer me ter spoil 'em.”

Subaru: “Honestly I can't really imagine them just accepting anyone spoiling them.” Frederica is serious to a fault, and Garfiel is a contrarian.

Neither of them are going to nicely accept their grandma's pampering. But since the two—no, the three—desire family love more than anything else, they

all make for something quite charming.

???: "I apologize for intruding on the discussion. Rudeness."

When the voice of a butler who silently appeared in this room whispers at Subaru's ear. Subaru's eyes shoot open in surprise as Clind takes his place to stand beside Anne-Rose.

Anne: "What's happened, Clind? I will tell you that I was enjoying a blissful moment with Emily just then."

Clind: "It pains me to so interrupt you. Heartache. However, I am required to inform that Roswaal-sama has made his return. Notice."

Anne: "He has? Another return from him timed so perfectly as to be calculated..." Muttered Anne-Rose in dissatisfaction, her brows furrowed.

While Subaru weeps silently at how even Roswaal's relatives feel this way about his habits, Anne-Rose stands from her seat.

Anne: "It appears that my uncle has returned, so I shall be excusing myself to welcome him. Emily, Subaru, and Lewes-san, I request you relax as you wait here for the siblings to return. ...Particularly Emily and Subaru. You will be busy."

Emilia: "Erm? Okay, got it. I'll wait here."

Emilia gives an earnest nod, and Anne-Rose gazes at her with affection. Then she glances to Subaru, piercing him with her gaze and negative aura.

While Subaru frowns at the disparity in their treatment, Anne-Rose exits the

room with Clind. Which is when Subaru notices the cups of tea assembled before himself, Emilia, and Lewes, and nearly squawks.

Subaru: "Did anyone see Clind-san set this tea?"

Emilia: "No, I didn't. Clind-san did excellent work as always."

Lewes: "Mhm, a real professional. This tea is cooled erkzactly ter my taste."

Subaru: "I mean my tea's at the perfect temperature for me too but... how about you, Emilia-tan?" Emilia: "I like it hot, so mine is sooo hot."

Subaru: "What the hell is Clind-san?"

Anne-Rose said to just accept it, but Subaru is having difficulty. Perhaps this is the fundamental difference between living in a parallel world, and being born and raised in one.

...Is what he figures as he glances at Emilia and Lewes, who also look to feel overwhelmed by Clind. What, so he's a deviation after all. When,

???: "Hell, so here's where all th'masterminds been fuckin' lurkin'."

A few minutes after Anne-Rose and Clind leave, a blond tiger-man opens the door and makes his entrance.

He looks to have noticed that Subaru and the others were obviously behind the trap, his expression extremely complex. Either way,

Subaru: "Looks like someone found out we're the villains."

Garfiel: "C'n tell yer that y'fuckin' got me good, I looked so frickin' lame."
Emilia: "How'd it go how'd it go? Did you talk?"

Garfiel clicks his fangs as he comes over, when Emilia excitedly accosts him. Lewes tucks her head in, awkward, while listening intently for Garfiel's next words.

Garfiel looks at the two ladies, and sighs.

Garfiel: "Yeh, thank yer fer yer excessive unneeded meddlin'. Sis n' me... sure, we had our talk. Y'ain't gotta worry none."

Emilia: "Really? Then how come you didn't come here together, holding hands?"

Garfiel: "Y'think we're capable 'v that embarrassing crap! Maybe they made up, but that don't mean a bro n' a sis're gonna hold hands so easy. Don't even joke."

Emilia: "But I don't think it's embarrassing, I think it's wonderful."

Emilia looks not to be teasing, but to sincerely think this, quite unfortunately. Garfiel has nothing more to say to her as he instead look at the hesitant Lewes.

Garfiel: "Granny."

Lewes: "...What's it, Gar-bo?"

Garfiel: "'M sorry for makin' you worry. 'M fine now, 'n Sis's fine too. Y'don't

have't worry.”

Garfiel rubs his nose as he talks, and Lewes falls into silence. Her mouth relaxes, and an aged smile unfitting to her youthful looks arises on her face.

Lewes: “I see. That ers a relief. Yer can't put ter much stress on yer elders. Makes them meet their end quicker.”

Garfiel: “It ain't a damn joke when you say it, granny, better watch out.”
Lewes regains her casual demeanour. Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: “Anyway, Captain. N' also Emilia-sama, 'm sorry fer makin' yer do that.”

Subaru: “Don't worry 'bout it. Me and Emilia-tan were just killing time by improving the interpersonal relations in this mansion. Nothing that deserves an apology. Right?”

Emilia: “Subaru, you were only killing time? This was a serious issue for them, you have to take it more seriously. Hpmf!”

Subaru: “Whah!? My face-saving modesty backfired!?”

Emilia fails to notice Subaru's roundabout consideration for Garfiel. Or so he thinks, when a smile etches itself onto Emilia's face and,

Emilia: “Heehee, just kidding. I know what you're doing. You're not honest at all, Subaru.”

Subaru: “My god... EMK (Emilia-tan Maji Koakuma) strikes, and her mystique compounds... she must be trying to kill me...”²

Garfiel: “The fuck did yer just do t'my apology, oi.”

Says Garfiel, stunned. Subaru and Emilia share a glance, before facing him again and, Both: “—We were happy to help.”

The two give their reply to his apology.

Garfiel frowns in dissatisfaction as Lewes shrugs in exasperation. Subaru shoots Emilia a thumbs up as she happily watches the two.

Subaru: “Also, Garfiel. What happened first with the reconciliation, but also with the supposed trigger for the whole thing, the meat pie. Honestly I was really looking forward to it.”

Garfiel: “Yer don't make a pie that fuckin' easy. Th'trick's t'cook it in th'oven good n' slow t'get that sumptuous taste. SUMPTUOUS ENOUGH TO PUT A BAUMBEM TO SLEEP 's a damn good saying here.”

Subaru: “The hell's a Baumbem. Is it like a baumkuchen? But I'm pretty sure if you leave baumkuchen unattended for too long it goes bad before it gets sumptuous.”

According to Garfiel, it will take two hours before the pie is ready.

Which means it'll coincide with normal dinnertime, and probably wind up as a dish there.

???: “—Which I must say soooooounds quite convenient.”

Having lost any way to distract himself from his hunger, Subaru redirects his attention to how to kill two hours of time—when a familiar voice speaks up.

The four glance over to the speaker, unanimously sour-faced.

???: “Myyyyyyyy goodness. I leave the mansion to attend to business, and whaaaaaaaaaat an unwelcoming hello aaaaaaaaaawaits me.”

Subaru: “Not that I'm not thankful for your work. But can you please just rationalize this as you reaping what you sow, this thing where we reflexively make this expression? Also me and them are still being nice. Look at Garfiel, he's gonna burst a vein.”

A vein bulges on Garfiel's forehead as his eyes begin going bloodshot.

This is the arrival of man whose refreshed expression remains stable even before Garfiel's glare— easily deduced from his characteristic speech pattern, Roswaal L. Mathers.

Roswaal was the mastermind behind the events in SANCTUARY, and having confessed so, has suffered a drop in amicability from basically everyone. Garfiel's rage burns particularly hot, and it's impossible to predict when he'll explode.

Subaru also feels mixed emotions about Roswaal. And after hearing postface to Roswaal's confession, his uncertainty has only peaked.

Subaru knows that Roswaal is not responsible for everything that happened in SANCTUARY and the mansion.

For some reason, Roswaal has only revealed this information to Subaru. Subaru doesn't know why this is, but feels no urge to purposefully reveal the truth to everyone else.

The onus lies entirely on Roswaal—or at least, 90% of it does. The remaining 10% lies on some other party.

Subaru would rather not encourage any unneeded anxiety at the moment.
Emilia: “Subaru, are you okay? The face you're making is sooo weird.” Subaru: “Seriously? What's it look like?”

Emilia: “Umm well, it's like your eyes gweenked nastier, like this.” Subaru: “Seriously? My face looks that cute?”

Emilia: “But it's not cute!”

Emilia's fingers pull the corners of her eyes upwards as she mimics Subaru's expression. Even when she's trying to emulate something so awful, her cuteness overrides it. Such is her charm.

Emilia pouts while Garfiel angrily seats himself. Subaru watches Lewes prepare tea for Garfiel as he speaks to Roswaal, the only one left standing.

Subaru: “Anyway, welcome back. Did you finish what you went out to do?”

Roswaal: “Ahhaaaaaa, how keenly I doooooooo feel Subaru-kun's kindness. And yes, without issue. I visited several villages within my domain, and our new domicile.”

Subaru: “Nevermind the domicile, you went around the territory? For what?”

Roswaal: “Beeeeeeecause of the ruckus from the territory's Lord's mansion buuuuuuurning down. Should I fail to demonstrate my good health, some rapscallions may begin deeeeeeeevising plots. I make it a rule to attend thoroughly to my land's peace aaaaaaaaand safety.”

Subaru: “Thoughts on the land's Lord being the worst rascalion devising the worst plots?”

Roswaal: “Hoooooow harsh. My citizens suffered no harm, and the villagers of Arlam are ignorant to the truth. Do you not think that this persistently thorny attitude of yours will hinder us iiiiiiiiiiin the future?”

Subaru: “Ghnnggh.”

Never misses a beat.

With that sharp jab of criticism, Roswaal regains his previous composure. If Subaru publicly reveals that Roswaal was the one behind this whole affair, then it only disadvantages them, both in regards to the Royal Selection and management of the territory. And so even the people of Arlam Village still believe that Roswaal is a good Lord.

Only Petra, who knows the truth, holds a different opinion. But she understands her current circumstances, and that the only thing to gain from revealing the truth is self-satisfaction. So it's doubtful that she'll do anything extreme. Cleverness does occasionally force people into making cruel decisions.

Subaru: “But that doesn't make it fine for you utilize this. You forget that, and once Emilia-tan's on the throne you're getting the guillotine.”

Roswaal: “Terrifying. Hoooooooowever, even then I maaaaaaaay have a chance to fuuuuuuulfil my goal.”

Garfiel: “We ain't fuckin' talkin' 'bout yer meeting yer goddamn goals. Gonna make Ram cry 'f yer keep comin' up with more bullcrap ideas, y'piece of shit.”

Surprisingly, Garfiel cuts in to stop Roswaal's provocations. Roswaal's brows

shoot up in surprise and he casually raises his hands.

Roswaal: “Goodness, aaaaaaaalright. I don't paaaaaaaarticularly wish to fight with you all aaaaaaaaanyway. Why must this escalate into an argument, when I ooooooonly came here to show my return? I must find this all raaaaaaaather unproductive.”

Emilia: “It's because you're saying things to make Subaru and Garfiel mad. And I can tell you're doing it on purpose. Enough of that, stop provoking people. You're not a child.”

Roswaal: “—”

Roswaal attempts to condescendingly resolve the issue, when Emilia presses down on him from further above, her hand to her hip. Roswaal's eyes shoot open in surprise while Emilia continues.

Emilia: “You don't have to be so anxious, we all remember what you did and what you promised. There's no point in purposefully acting bad and worrying everyone. You are just so hopeless.”

Emilia sounds like she's scolding a disobedient child.

But it seems impossible to dismiss her statements as incorrect or misplaced, and Roswaal remains silent without any rebuttals. In fact, the way he narrows his eyes and grimaces awkwardly makes it feel like Emilia hit the bullseye.

Though Subaru doesn't actually believe that Roswaal is seriously operating off such childish sentiments.

Subaru: “That really did clear the air though. As we expect from Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “....? Mm, thank you. Also, there had to more reasons for why you went around the domain than just that. What else did you do, Roswaal?”

Roswaal: “Ahahaaaaaaa, you've grown more perceptive. I patrolled the region for reasons as stated, to demonstrate my health, and... to prepare the residents of SANCTUARY for their migration.”

Garfiel: “Th'preparations to move!”

Those words keep Garfiel from staying silent. Lewes hurriedly returns to his side as he slams his palms on the table.

Garfiel: “That means prepping where they're goin', yeh?”

Roswaal: “Assuredly. Their time as refugees means that Arlam Village is the best place to aaaaaaaaccept them. But there's a limit to what the village can hold. Should their population double from its original number, they won't be able to sustain themselves. They could expand the village, of course, but that runs into the problem of the barrier.”

Garfiel: “Barrier? Y'fucker, you fuckin' laid more'v those fuckin' things all over th'fuckin'—”

Subaru: “No hold up, Garfiel. We're not talking about a barrier like SANCTUARY's. There's a whole bunch of witchbeasts lurking in the mountains around there. So there's a barrier around the village to keep them away. That's the one Roswaal's talking about.”

That barrier is what spurred the whole witchbeast debacle.

It's entirely infeasible to coexist with the witchbeasts, and being that the village needs this segregation, it's difficult to expand Arlam Village.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun explained it perfectly, theeeeeeeere's the issue. Whiiiiiiiich means that the people of SANCTUARY must be distributed partly to Arlam Village, and then iiiiiiindividually to other contenders. Regardless of where welcomes them, they cannot stay together as people of SANCTUARY infinitely. I do feel the heart-wrenching sorrow, as I watch them leeeeeeeave the nest.”

Lewes: “Impudence and prattle...”

Lewes cannot hold in the insults as Roswaal feigns tears. Roswaal crafts a smile and continues,

Roswaal: “Aaaaaaand so, I made a quiiiiiiiick rounds of the territory. Though for interests of distance and time, llllllllll merely visited the neeeeeeeearby locations. I sent messengers to the other townships, seeeeeeeing as we have an abundance of issues that need resolution.”

Subaru: “Yeah seriously. You don't get back to your office quick, and Otto's gonna die from karoshi. It's where you die crushed between the weight of responsibility and work.”

Roswaal: “What a novel way to die. Veeeeeeery intriguing.”

Subaru agrees, but doesn't pursue the topic.

Roswaal's back, so Ram should be more lively. ...Is how far Subaru thinks

before he tilts his head, feeling something awry.

Emilia: “Actually, Anne said she left to welcome you, but... she's not with you?” It seems that Emilia hit upon the same question. Roswaal raises his finger.

Roswaal: “That's because I had a reeeeeeequest for her. I was thinking to address one of those issues requiring resolution.”

Emilia: “Issues requiring resolution?”

Roswaal: “The one in the banquet hall. I believe that you have already prepared yourself for it, Emilia-sama.”

Emilia: “—!”

Emilia's shoulders jerk up in surprise.

But the shock only lasts an instant. Her expression immediately turns serious, and she glances at Subaru with strong volition in her amethyst eyes.

He savours the tingle down his spine as he tilts his head, questioning. But nobody gives him a clear answer.

Emilia: “Okay. Is it starting right now?”

Roswaal: “We can start the instant that you are ready. And we still have time before the pie is done cooking. I would say that now is the perfect time for it.”

Emilia: “This is such an important thing, but doesn't this all feel sooo sloppy?”

Roswaal: “It's presently difficult for us to schedule any designated times. Considering that you'll be occupied from tomorrow onwards, should we not take advantage of this opportunity?”

Emilia: “Yeah... okay. I'll do it.” Roswaal nods, entirely satisfied.

The two of them look to have reached an agreement, but Subaru has no idea what they're discussing. Garfiel and Lewes must also be in the dark.

Subaru: “Hey, stop going off agreeing to things by yourselves. What are you talking about? You better not be trying to make Emilia-tan do anything funny again.”

Roswaal: “That would be a teeeeeeeeeerrible misunderstanding, Subaru-kun. And do relax. This issue not only involves Emilia-sama, but very much yourself aaaaaaaaas well.”

Subaru: “What do you mean I'm also—”

Involved? Before he can finish his sentence, Roswaal draws his face near. Subaru unwittingly backs

away, his back hitting the wall, and Roswaal's finger landing on his nose. Roswaal: “—We're discussing the ceremony for your cherished knighthood.”

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Subaru: “You know! Usually you don't keep the details of an important event a secret from the people involved! Do people throw surprise weddings for the bride and groom? Are surprise funerals ever a thing? No they are not.”

Having been dragged into a room to get changed, Subaru complains while taking off his track suit. The news from Roswaal in the dining room was an absolute shock to him.

—Knighthood.

The ceremony where the master acknowledges their subordinate as their Knight, and all others recognize their change in status.

It comes with extensive formalities and etiquette, which surely differ by the country and by worldview. Subaru has witnessed many such ceremonies in manga and anime, but it's inconceivable that he'd remember what they had in common and what diverged.

And of course he can't be expected to know the etiquette for a Lugnican accolade.

Subaru: “Expect they all went and fucking prepared everything like that's the obvious thing to do. Maybe that damn Anne-Rose was jealous about how I'm all over Emilia-tan and's trying to humiliate me!”

Otto: “I'd surely think not? While naturally the star of an accolade is the knight who receives it, their master is the one obligated to inform them. If Anne-Rose-sama acted out of such pointless bullheadedness, it would humiliate not only yourself, but Emilia-sama. Do you believe that someone as clever as her would do that?”

Subaru glances over to Otto, who is assisting with his change of clothes. You may ask how do you possibly assist with a change in clothes, but these

ceremonial outfits have various modes of dress. That Subaru doesn't know.

Clind: “Natsuki-sama. The correct way to wear this requires you to begin with this undervestment, and proceed with these lowers. Advice.”

Subaru: “Ah, thanks. Or no actually these clothes fit me so well it's creepy, how long has this ceremony been planned exactly?”

Clind: “It was raised in discussion instantly following your arrival in our household. And once decisions were made to hold the ceremony after Roswaal-sama's return... I assure you that Emilia-sama has studied and rehearsed the ceremony thoroughly. Report.”

Subaru: “The report's late! And why was Emilia-tan keeping it a secret too!?”

Otto: “Perhaps because it would be awkward? Anyway, you truly don't know a single step of the process? That would present something of a problem...”

Subaru puts his arms through the sleeves of the clothes that Clind gives him, lost on what to do. Otto perceives Subaru's genuine discomposure, and seems to start seeing the obstacles impeding this ceremony.

Subaru: “Right? It's doomed. I'm glad Emilia-tan feels this way, and it's crazy how honoured I am to receive a knighthood, but we're screwed if this ceremony fizzles out aren't we? Yeah okay I better get on my hands and knees and beg for this to be postpo—”

???: “Y'step forward when yer called, and kneel before Emilia-sama. Then y'draw yer sword from its scabbard and pass it t'her. Emilia-sama takes the sword and puts it to yer neck, she speaks the oath... then you accept the oath in

return. Thassall.”

Subaru: “...What, seriously?” Mutters Subaru in shock.

Everyone in the room gazes at Garfiel, who crosses his arms. Garfiel: “What. Y'don't believe me?”

Subaru: “It's not that, it's that I'm shocked that you know this. How out of character is it for you to be versed in formal events like this...?”

Garfiel: “No, Captain. It ain't that I know anythin' 'bout formal events.”

Garfiel waves his hand in astonishment, but that doesn't eliminate the fact that he just outlined the formal process of an accolade. Subaru furrows his brows questioningly, and,

Garfiel: “'S just that knighthoods 're awesome so I memorized it.” Subaru: “Oh, okay. Got it.”

The reasoning is so convincing that Subaru instantly agrees with it.

His mighty chuuni mind offers assistance even here. Of course Garfiel would know about accolades! ...Is the persuasiveness of this argument.

Otto: “Does that account align with your knowledge, Clind-san?”

Clind: “I am only scantily versed in the topic, but my knowledge does coincide with what I heard. I bow my head before Garfiel-sama's mastery. Succinct.”

Otto: “But that makes it sound as though you also know the procedure... no, nevermind. Disregard that comment.”

Otto's life is one of opening cans of worms to find demons inside.

Nobody who witnessed the mysterious gleam in Clind's monocled eye would criticise Otto for his retreat.

Either way, Subaru smooths the wrinkles out of his clothes, puts on his jacket, and begins adorning

it with the required ornamentations.

Subaru: "This outfit is crazy. It took me ages to get used to the butler uniform, but I don't think I'll ever own this look."

Otto: "You won't be granted enough opportunities to wear it that you could say that you 'own' it. It would be another case, were you entering nobility... though, I suppose it's yet unclear what your future will bring."

Subaru: "Meaning?"

Otto: "Emilia-sama is on the social ladder. Being that you are following her, I suspect you will attend more than a few events in this vein. This outfit was specifically tailored, after all."

While feeling admiration for Otto's piece, thoughts of the future depress Subaru.

He imagines these formal events, and his heart shivers, inept as it is at remaining stoic. Though these worries are only to be had if he safely gets through this upcoming ceremony.

Subaru: "Goddamn Roswaal, bet he hid it on purpose to make a laughingstock of me..."

Garfiel: “Sulkin' ain't gonna help yer none, Captain. Now repeat what my amazin' self said t'make sure yer don't forget it.”

Subaru: “I kneel, draw the sword from its scabbard, give it to her, and say the oath. I mean I've gone through two graduation ceremonies, I can at least memorize this much.”

Except he attended those ceremonies after properly practising for them.

Subaru: “I know it's way late in saying but if this's an accolade then all the imperial knights must've done it.”

Otto: “Not only the imperial knights, but everyone who holds the title of Knight. Though I believe it's rare to disregard all these requirements and pledge directly to a master. Usually you would swear fealty to the nation before selecting a master.”

Subaru: “So it's the difference between serving the country and serving an individual. I think it's right to be serving an individual.”

Either way. He can say 'I am a Knight', but it doesn't feel true.

Subaru has proclaimed himself as Emilia's knight multiple times. Insisted it.

Even though he knows his false title is gaining legitimacy, he cannot exactly accept it. He also questions how exactly being recognized as a Knight will change him, too.

Subaru: “All this after you dressed me in these actual clothes. Seriously this fits me perfectly, when did you take my measurements?”

Clind: “Daily, interspersed between breaks in your awareness. I had already confirmed that it fit, but it elates me to see you dressing. Splendiferous.”

Subaru: “I'm unsurprised about the measurements, but when did you check the fit? Have I somehow
been dressed in this outfit before?”

Clind gives no reply as he smiles, and brings Subaru, who has finished dressing, over to a mirror. As Subaru stands reflected in the full-length mirror, his breath catches.

He wears a black ceremonial outfit that clearly exceeds his standing, opulently but not outrageously decorated. No matter how Subaru poses, the captivating clothes make it look good. And when he holds himself soberly, indeed this is an outfit for formal ceremonies.

But, yeah, it definitely feels like Subaru is inferior to the clothes. Something feels off, like he's attending Shichi-Go-San, or something. Even so—

Otto: “Mm. It looks better on you than I expected.”

Garfiel: “Does feel like th'clothes're wearin' you, but they ain't totally defeated ya. Y'c'n relax, Captain.”

Clind: “Indeed, it suits you well. Emilia-sama's impression of you shall surely climb to even greater heights. Amicability Rising.”

Subaru: “You sincerely think that? You all sincerely honestly think that?”

Subaru readjusts his collar times upon time as she glances suspiciously at Otto, who despite his frankness, failed to mock Subaru's appearance.

But Otto's expression remains perfectly stable, and he gazes at Subaru with pride. Not even Subaru can possibly reply to that.

Garfiel: “Here, take this, Captain.”

No amount of fiddling will invite any dramatic change.

Subaru sighs as he turns around, and Garfiel supportingly hands him his knightblade. Subaru reflexively accepts it, when the slender thing makes him swallow his breath.

Clind: “It would be best that you used your own favoured blade, but being that you possessed none, our household provided this. You may keep it should you so fancy. Gift.”

Subaru: “A knight's sword... huh. And it's real, naturally?”

Otto: “I doubt you would ever find a wooden sword with such excellent craftsmanship. Only a child would find joy in something like th—hm? Am I sensing a new business opportunity...?”

While witnessing the potential birth of wooden swords in parallel world souvenir shops, Subaru feels the weight of the sword in his hands.

This is not his first time holding a sword.

Last was during the witchbeast affair in Arlam Village, when he went into the mountains with Ram to search for Rem. He accepted a sword from the village's men's brigade, wielding the thing with barely any thought.

The sword broke before he could use it to fight any witchbeasts, so while it didn't manage to be

anything decisive, it did provide Subaru with his first experience in stabbing a living creature with a blade, which he has never done since.

This knightblade should be thinner and lighter than that previous one. But the weight he currently feels in his hands is beyond compare.

Subaru: “—”

He unconsciously clicks his throat, a constricting feeling in his chest. The weight from that sword and this sword are entirely different.

And Subaru knows that the entire purpose of this ceremony is to recognize that fact.

Otto: “—Natsuki-san. I'll come and call you before it begins. I'll do the final inspection of your dress then, so please make sure to keep it orderly.”

Subaru: “...Understood.”

Otto must have seen the shift in Subaru's expression, and sensed how he was beginning to properly face the ceremony.

With those words, he and the others leave the room. Subaru: “—”

Left by himself in the room, Subaru drags over a nearby chair and seats himself before the mirror. With the sword in his hands and his visage in the mirror, he submerges himself in thought.

Knight. The weight of the title presses down on Subaru's shoulders.

Had Subaru ever seriously considered the significance of this word he so frivolously used? Naturally, he had been entirely serious back then. He would not use this as armour to conceal his rashness in proclaiming himself as Emilia's knight.

However,

Subaru: "Julius, Reinhardt."

Subaru thinks of the upper echelon of knights in this country. One is the Knight Of Knights. One is the Knight Impeccable.

They are the pride of knighthood, and the emblem of anything knightly.

When Subaru called himself a knight, ignorant to those facts, Julius sternly beat the truth into him. Subaru: "What a knight needs is power and fealty... I think was it."

If those are the requirements, then Subaru is still unfit to be a knight.

Subaru's feelings for Emilia are nothing as majestic as fealty.

He is incapable on his own, and fails to meet average capabilities even with Beatrice's help. Both his power and his fealty are as insufficient as ever.

But now he has the will that he previously lacked.

It's not fealty, but it's comparably strong.

He might lack power, but he has the spirit and resolve to compensate for what he lacks.

He can't change that he seems too awkward to be called a knight, but that's what makes it Subaru. Like hell Natsuki Subaru is suited to anything so magnificent as chivalry.

???: “What. Seems that I didn't need to visit after all, in fact.”

It happens as Subaru faces himself in the mirror, having resolved one point.

He sees a small silhouette standing beside him, hunched forward as he is. The girl reflected aside him in the mirror, with her long, extravagant pigtails, is Beatrice.

Subaru: “I'm getting dressed. You dirty loli.”

Beatrice: “You're already dressed, I suppose. And I was asked to come here to do something since you looked so persistently uncertain, in fact. So I had to come here to give you a slap on the back, I suppose. —But it seems that I didn't need to, in fact.”

Subaru: “Those guys...”

Who was the meddler here? Otto? Garfiel? Perhaps even Clind? Or maybe it was all of them, and Subaru has to smile bitterly at how probable it is.

Indeed. There is no one more suited to give Subaru a pep talk at this moment than Beatrice. She is the best choice. So he'll impose on her care.

And accordingly uplift Beatrice's expression, as she regrets the needlessness of her presence here. Subaru: “My back.”

Beatrice: "...?"

Subaru: "If you're gonna slap me, then please do it. I do feel like I've sorted some things out... but I'm still looking for that final push."

Beatrice's eyes widen in shock.

Her expression is so incredibly darling that Subaru has to keep himself from chuckling, Subaru: "Come on, please."

Beatrice: "You don't have to worry yourself... I know I'm not worried myself, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm not saying this out of worry. I just think that, no matter who gives you that slap on the back, that winds up being the final push. So if I'm choosing who that person is then I want it to be you."

Beatrice: "—"

Subaru: "I want you to slap me on the back and be the final strength I need to be Emilia's knight. It

feels more like me that way."

He might just be saying it for peace of mind, but that's great, what's so bad about peace of mind? Perhaps it's just an issue with how he's feeling. But that just makes it more legitimate; of course he should have her make him feel better, then.

Because the heart always expresses itself with the simplest language.

Beatrice: "Y-you hopeless fool, in fact. You'd be absolutely lost without Betty,

I suppose.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I would. I'm utterly useless without you. And when I'm with you I'm normally useless.”

Beatrice: “Which means you're still useless, in fact! Sheer discourtesy, I suppose!”

Subaru: “And now this useless fool's gonna be Emilia's knight and gradually stop being so useless. So whenever I do start bordering on uselessness, I'm putting my hopes on you.”

Subaru lifts himself from the chair and pats Beatrice's head.

Beatrice looks dissatisfied with his vigorous manhandling, but makes no motion to stop him, and voices not a single complaint.

Subaru: “—”

After sating himself with Beatrice pats, Subaru slowly turns to present her his back. And surely she understands what this means.

She takes a faint breath, readying herself. Beatrice: “—Hiyaah, in fact!”

Subaru: “—!”

With an adorable shout, the noise of her palm peals through the room.

The impact from her small hand stings more than Subaru expected. And an even greater shock runs from his back into his whole body.

Subaru: “Man you're surprisingly strong.”

Beatrice: “I didn't walk around carrying big, heavy books every day for nothing, I suppose.” Beatrice's bragging makes him think back on her time in the Archive.

Why yes, Beatrice was always reading books sizeable enough to conceal her small frame. Today is where she showcases the effects of constantly bearing all that weight.

Though he doesn't know if muscle work-outs actually do anything for spirits. Subaru: “So we've unexpectedly uncovered a muscle magician. Massive Beako.” Beatrice: “I suspect you just used an incredibly terrible epithet on me, in fact.” Subaru: “Just your imagination. And man that fired me up. Thanks.”

Beatrice: “...You're my contractor, so of course I'd do this, I suppose.”

Blushing slightly, Beatrice averts her gaze from Subaru.

It makes him want to pat her again. But before he can reach out to her— Clind: “—Natsuki-sama, the time is near. Preparations.”

—Clind knocks on the door and peers in, summoning him. With the seconds looming in closer, he gulps from the tension.

But his limbs and face feel less rigid than he expected. The pent-up tension loosens him up in a good way, and he quietly sings the praises of Beatrice's unexpectedly effective slap.

Clind: “A seat has been prepared for you as well, Beatrice-sama. As I shall also be humbly attending, I would hold the greatest of appreciation supposing that you may accept my presence. Understanding.”

Subaru: “Okay, got it. Please don't laugh if I mess up.” Clind: “As you command. Solemnity.”

Clind waits outside the door to escort Subaru, who gives a sigh and clicks his neck. He glances back to Beatrice, unsure of what to say,

Subaru: “Well, I'm off.”

Beatrice: “As you should be, in fact.” It's a simple exchange, but it's enough.

Her words and actions have already given him more than enough. Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

But at the very end of the end, Beatrice halts Subaru one last time.

Just before he leaves the room, Subaru glances back to a red-faced Beatrice, Beatrice: “That outfit looks great on you, I suppose.”

And with that, she supplies him with the last bit of confidence he needed.

Final Chapter: A Nonsense Dance, Under The Moonlight

—Subaru has been in this hall before, but it looks nothing like how he remembers it.

Candelabra line the red carpet. The flickering of their crimson flames steeps the room in further formality, prompting everyone in attendance to straighten their posture.

Almost all of the important people of the mansion stand evenly by the wall. Which means the main players of this story, but also includes some attendants from the Milord household.

Assembling only people relevant to Subaru means monopolizing the assembly with his ingroup. Even he understands that many more people must play witness to this event.

But, having said that, should they truly have brought all of the Lewes doubles along?

Lewes nodded at him, telling him not to worry about it, but of course it's going to nag at him. Although he knows that the girls are harmless unless directed, the uncertainty over what they might possibly do unsettles him.

Though, everyone else must share that same anxiety, except about Subaru.

There are so many points worthy of ridicule among the people here.

All the main players are primly dressed in formalwear, which is hilarious.

Nevermind Roswaal and Anne-Rose, who seem accustomed to the outfits: Otto and Garfiel look even more awkward in their getups than Subaru. And disregard how Garfiel scrunches up his face, irked by his stuffy collar, Otto hasn't even noticed how blatantly awkward he looks. Guy's a riot.

The servants include Frederica and Clind, who are always in formalwear. Subaru does have some qualms about Ram, who stands with them in her maid outfit as if this is entirely reasonable. But once he sees what is beside her, his breath catches.

A blue-haired girl, seated in a chair.

Her eyes are closed. Naturally. She is still asleep. Subaru resents how considerate Ram was to bring her here, and have her attend the ceremony. He resents how Ram smirks at him, announcing that she was the one who proposed this.

Subaru looks further along to find Petra gazing at him, finely dressed as he is, with pride. Her dress amplifies her splendour, and she shines brightly enough to match Anne-Rose and Beatrice. She's meant to be a simple village girl, so how

do you explain her composure here? Beatrice wears the same outfit as always, but her expression towards Subaru is gentle. Her flushed

cheeks remind him of their exchange in the dressing room, which starts making Subaru embarrassed as well.

And standing before him— “—”

—Is a silver-haired girl, waiting.

In her ceremonial outfit, Emilia enchants Subaru with an utterly new kind of brilliance.

Her silver hair shimmers like moonlight, and her amethyst eyes glimmer like jewels. Her face is tantalizingly beautiful as she purses her lips, apparently tense about this vital ceremony.

The outfit amplifies the purity that Subaru usually feels about Emilia, hallowed as a priestess' vestments, lined with sublime gold that keenly announces the nobility and seriousness of this ritual.

The instant that Subaru sights her, everything in his head falls hush.

The last vestiges of his bubbling emotions disperse, and everything except Emilia disappears from his mind.

He is absolutely not going to make a mockery of this ceremony, or of the people watching.

What does he need to do? Who does he need to be looking at? Where is his heart sitting? No need to tell him. He already knows.

“—”

Nobody instructs him; his feet take the step forward.

His footsteps make no sound upon the rich carpet. He forgets the weight of the knightblade at his hip, focused with passion holding him aloft, but calm as a resting sea, as he approaches Emilia.

Even through the storm of onlooking gazes, his heart remains unshakable. The only thing to cast ripples in Subaru's heart, in this instant, is Emilia.

He draws near to her, close enough to touch her.

She stands on a dais, her tantalizingly beautiful cheeks rigid. Subaru kneels before her.

With his knee to the ground, he bows his head.

All the ceremonial customs that Garfiel told him about take instant command of his body. He keeps his eyes closed as her intense gaze stares down at him.

He could almost forget to breathe in this atmosphere. Pleasant stress plays on his skin as he looks up, and he takes the sword from his waist.

He reverently lifts the weighty blade, unsheathing it horizontally before his chest.

Light from the candles washes over the steel, lighting Subaru and Emilia's eyes equally bright.

“__”

The beauty of the unsheathed blade burns itself into Subaru's eyes as he

presents it to Emilia. She sees the sword cast before her. Her lips tremble with some form of sentiment.

But she instantly asserts control over the words before they can spill, and she holds herself firm beneath the surge of emotion.

Her pale fingers touch the sword. She slowly lifts the heavy thing, until its tip points to the ceiling.

Emilia is beautiful as she holds the sword aloft. Subaru restrains his desires to witness the sight, bows his head, and closes his eyes.

What is presented to Emilia is the sword, the pride of the knight, alongside his being and his neck, which are those of the knight.

“—”

A Knight devotes their life to their Master.

Subaru's posture illustrates this vow, making Emilia's lips and eyes waver. But her hesitation only lasts a moment. Her pursed lips and focused gaze carry not the slightest indecision.

The point of the sword descends upon Subaru's left shoulder.

She rests the flat of the blade on his shoulders, and the weight almost makes him cry out. The pressure bearing on him is nothing physical, but mental.

Perhaps this sensation is the one that every knight must bear, that thing called 'pride'. In this exact instant, Natsuki Subaru finally understands it.

The point of the blade moves to his right shoulder.

He feels the weight identically, but the coolness of the blade remains with him this time. Of course. This is where the ceremony's most important moment

begins.

“—”

“—”

Silence falls upon the hall.

No. The hall had been silent so far. The silence until now had been steeped in a strange tension, ardent and loud.

But the silence in this instant carries a new fire.

Absent of tension, absent of zeal, absent of anything, this silence is legitimate.

A quiet that falls equally upon the heart of Emilia, of Subaru, of everyone in attendance. Only one person is granted the right to shatter it.

“—To the sun that gazes over the radiant world, to the stars that watch the realm in its sleep. To the winds, to the waters, to the earth, to the light, to the spirits residing in everything.”

The silence shatters.

Emilia's lips sing the ceremonial rite.

“—To the grand world that received you, that nurtured you, that delivered you.” Trembling. His heart is trembling.

His teeth don't feel to sit right. What is his heart having trouble with? It irritates him to even question his mental turmoil.

All he wants to do in this moment is drown in the chime of that bell.

“—To the pride that supports you, that you built, that you fostered.” He feels the heat in the gaze upon him compound.

The passion burning inside him is ready to combust.

His heart thumps wildly, maniacally, as he regardless waits for the question.

“—To everything that watches over you, to the world that raised you, to the pride that supports you, let your way cast no shame. Without fear, without dread, without doubt, be as you are in your heart.”

The rite ends.

The question is coming.

This will end the ceremony. Not even Subaru knows the answer to this question. However,

“—With your will always strong, and as everything that surrounds you does, will you swear to protect me from this moment forth?”

—His heart does know how to answer Emilia's question.

“To the sun, to the stars, to the world, to my pride—and.”

He will announce his gratitude and determination to everything stated in the rites. Before he makes the pledge, he thinks of people who he assuredly must thank.

And so the words come naturally from his lips: “—To my mother and my father, I swear.” “—”

“I will protect you. I will realise your wishes. —My name is Natsuki Subaru.”

He raises his head.

The sword remains at his right cheek. But its gleam fails to catch his eye. The only thing he sees is the brilliant amethyst, gazing back at him.

“Emilia. I am your knight.” “—Mm.”

He says the words, and she gives her answer. Emilia's eyes flood with emotion.

But she manages to keep anything from spilling as she lifts the sword from Subaru's shoulder. She fixes its alignment and presents it back to him.

He respectfully accepts it in both his hands, and sheathes it in its scabbard. Subaru returns the blade to his hip as he looks up at Emilia, still kneeling.

He sees Emilia give a slight nod, and stands up. Where he,

“Also Emilia-tan you look mega sexycute in that outfit.” “You dummy.”

—Shattering the seriousness of the ceremony, Emilia pokes out her tongue, red-faced.

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Many dishes line the table in the banquet hall.

Social standing and class present no issue as everyone present at the accolade chats with each other, turning the buffet into something of a get-together.

Subaru: “I just went through one of the most stressful things of my life, and look at you, having all the fun.”

He watches the banquet from the terrace outside, bathed in the night wind.

A plate of food from the table and a drink rest on the nearby railing, but the

swell from before hasn't passed.

He's having trouble getting any food or drink down his throat.

The hot flush from his neck upwards isn't going away.

His stomach tells him that he's hungry, but his chest is too full for anything to get through. Subaru: “—”

In the corner of his eye, he sees Petra dancing at the head of the hall in her dress. It's the kind of dance they do during festivals in Arlam Village, but with Petra's take on it, and with her proficiency in it, it is certainly fit for a noble's mansion.

She pulls a blushing Beatrice along with her, forcing her into a shoddy dance. Though she tries desperately to stay apathetic and expressionless, Subaru spots how her ears and nose tremble, unable to hold it in.

As always, it's Petra dragging helpless Beatrice into it.

Subaru's cheeks relax as he takes his glass. He's managed to secure enough composure to at least wet his tongue. Though, he's not ready to reach for Garfiel and Frederica's pie just yet.

???: “—There you are, Subaru.”

Subaru leans on the bannister, staring up at the sky, when a voice calls him. He looks down to find a moon pixie, her beauty only embellished beneath its light.

Subaru: “Or no it's Emilia-tan. Thought it was an angel.” Emilia: “You're saying weird stuff again. Are you drunk?”

Subaru: “I'm still underage so no I'm not drinking. If I'm drunk on anything, then it's on the atmosphere and my own ego.”

Emilia: "See, so you are drunk."

Emilia giggles, and Subaru has to furrow his brows at that.

He sees her pale skin peeking out from beneath her neat dress—and the flush on her neck and cheeks, which makes him agree with her current state.

Subaru: "The heck, Emilia-tan. You go asking me if I'm drunk, when it looks like you're who's been drinking."

Emilia: "I haven't been. They just gave me some punch. I never drink alcohol and go all funny." Subaru: "Man you're cute."

Emilia pouts, completely forgetting the seriousness from the ceremony. Meaning that this right here is just a completely normal adorable girl.

Emilia: "So, Subaru. What are you doing alone out here?"

Subaru: "Well, I already told you. I'm drunk on the atmosphere and my ego." It's a frivolous reply, but not a completely inaccurate one, either.

What is there to call this but going out into the night alone, moping, unable to vent? Not that he can divulge his feelings to anyone so easily.

Emilia: "Do you regret it...?"

Subaru: "Absolutely not. Gonna be hearing none of that, Emilia." Emilia: "Mm, I'm sorry for that. Sorry. But I'm happy too."

Her cheeks still flushed from alcohol, Emilia takes a step closer to Subaru.

She leans on the bannister beside him. Their shoulders are close enough to touch, and even with clothes between them, Subaru's body flares hotter.

Emilia: “Subaru. I apologize that the accolade came out of nowhere. I'd been ready the whole time, so I thought you knew about it too.”

Subaru: “No I'm probably just an idiot for not realising. Thinking back, you did keep asking me if I'd practised, but I just came up with bullshit answers to brush it off every time.”

Emilia assumed that Subaru knew, and had been regularly checking on his progress.

Subaru had simply never realised it, getting through the conversations with frivolities as they came, never understanding what Emilia was trying to say, while devoting himself to other things.

And anyway this whole accolade thing was,

Subaru: “Roswaal's fault. Actually almost everything's been his fault lately. Is he trying to humiliate me? He's been going seriously overboard this last while.”

Emilia: “I kinda think Roswaal's always been like that... but, yes, it does feel like he's been provoking you more than he used to. Maybe he wants your attention.”

Subaru: “That's terrifying, Emilia-tan.”

Subaru's attention will only make Roswaal an even more hopeless person, so let's not have that. Subaru grimaces at the surprisingly possible idea, and Emilia laughs, waving her hand easily.

Emilia: “I'm just joking. I don't think Roswaal knows how he should act now that we know about his plotting. I'm sure that, in a bit, he'll go back to being like before.”

Subaru: “If he goes back to 'being like before' it sounds like he didn't learn anything, but... well, it's better than him changing on us and leaving us lost on how to respond.”

It might seem like a half-hearted decision, but Subaru will agree with it for now.

With that part of the conversation over, Emilia takes a sip from her glass. She's had it with her the entire time, and if Subaru's guess is correct, then it's the alcoholic kind of punch.

It feels like Emilia is getting more intoxicated, which both scares and interests him. Emilia: “Say, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Hm, what? The alcohol's heating you up so it's time to get undressed? Better not do it here. Okay, let's find somewhere else. Off we go.”

Emilia: “Sorry. I'm not entirely sure what you're saying. No, we're staying here.”

Emilia shoots Subaru a slight glare. It makes him shrink back and lower his head, when she jerks her chin toward the banquet hall.

Emilia: “They look like they're having fun.”

Subaru: “Errryeeah, they do. It's a noble mansion but even the servants are welcome, feels really cozy. As a member of the lower-middle class peasantry, I'd say it's basically the ideal.”

Emilia: “Mm, I agree. I think it's sooo wonderful.”

Subaru notices the affection and desire in her amethyst eyes.

Subaru and Emilia might not be witnessing the same picture. Emilia is surely seeing a peaceful scene, absent of any class-or race-based discrimination.

Subaru only perceives the superficial layer of things. Their viewpoints differ completely.

They see the same thing, but think differently. And Subaru thinks the discrepancy is fine.

Emilia: “What's going on, Subaru? You look sooo peaceful.”

Subaru: “I wonder. Maybe I'm just happy that I'm here, seeing the same things as you, Emilia-tan.” Emilia: “Really? Then I'm happy that you're seeing things the same way.”

Subaru: “I don't know. I might not be. But I think it's alright for us to differ.”

Emilia glances at Subaru. He feels her gaze but keeps looking straight ahead, his cheeks relaxing into a slight smile.

Emilia notices him smiling, and nods.

It happens right when they reach their understanding that,

Subaru: “Oh, goddamn Otto. He's overdoing it, doubt he can even hold his liquor.”

In the middle of the hall, Garfiel challenges Otto to drink a full glass of expensive-looking alcohol in one go. Otto slams the glass back down to the table, having beautifully chugged the whole thing, to the applause of the onlooking crowd.

But Otto's face flushes bright red before swiftly paling dead white. Following this transformation, Garfiel immediately shoulders Otto and goes rushing out of the hall.

Subaru: "Guess they're going to the toilet."

Emilia: "Will Otto-kun be okay? Um, he kind of looked like how the dogs in the forest do when they eat poison mushrooms, just then..."

Subaru: "You should know what's up now that you've drunk yourself to your limit and hit adulthood, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Is that how it works?" Subaru: "No I mean I don't know."

He's underage.

And how expensive was that liquor that Otto just drank, and is probably regurgitating? Doubtful that anything cheap or mass-produced is going to be included in this banquet.

Subaru shoots Roswaal a glance. Perceptive as he is, Roswaal catches the look and raises his glass to Subaru. The Margrave in his clown make-up easily drinks the same alcohol that defeated Otto. Either his dignity is winning, or he's just used to the liquor.

Emilia: "...Subaru. I want to tell you something."

Subaru: "What a coincidence. I want you to tell me something too."

Breaking the silence that falls between them, Emilia whispers quietly enough to Subaru that only he will hear. He nods, and while still leaning on the railing, adjusts his posture.

Emilia turns to face him too, leaving them gazing at each other within breathing range. Subaru reflexively steps backwards, but,

Emilia: "No running."

Emilia's hand grabs him, stopping his retreat.

The step he took winds up as a half-step, putting them even closer than before. Subaru stumbles forward and bumps onto Emilia's forehead.

He hurriedly tries to draw back, but Emilia's grip on his ceremonial dress prevents him.

Subaru: "E-Emilia-tan? I'm happy about this situation but, it's sorta a little tense for a conversation..."

Emilia: "I'm tense too. This is my first time having such an important talk with anyone. So we're even."

Subaru: "N-no I think I'm winning here..."

He desperately tries to smile and brush this off, but Emilia won't let him go.

Emilia is warm against him as he attempts to at least ease his own stress, and awkwardly moves to hide Emilia from the banquet hall.

It is obvious that they're hugging when they're horizontal like this. If Subaru

shuffles over a little, then it should just look like he's got his hands on the railing, staring up at the night sky and waxing poetic.

Subaru: “Ok so those worries are dealt with, now tell me anything.”

Emilia: “...Okay, here's a talk between me and my Sir Knight. It's about why Roswaal invited me to participate in the Royal Selection.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia has never discussed this with Subaru before.

And it must have something to do with the Trial, that so consistently discouraged her.

Subaru swallows his breath and looks down at Emilia.

Their gazes crash into one another. Seeing himself reflected in Emilia's eyes, Subaru nods with determination.

Emilia: “Before Elixir Forest was frozen, I used to live there with my Mother and... with the other elves.”

It's a tale of happy memories, a tale of sorrowful memories.

While it comes with its hiccups and pauses, Emilia sincerely tells Subaru the story.

Emilia didn't know her parents. Fortuna loved Emilia in their place. The villages kindly accepted them when they had nowhere to go. And then there was the organization called the Witch Cult, secretly helping the village, and this

character named Juice.

It was a limited world, but one that showered Emilia in love and kindness. And it was all ruined on the day that Elio Forest froze.

The With Cult acted brutally as the witch named Pandora and the Cardinal appeared. The arrival of the Witchbeast Blacksnake, and Fortuna and Juice's tragedy. Emilia kept her mother's problems, and so lost both her and the village. Then came Puck, who she met upon awakening after a long time in the ice.

Emilia: "Puck said he'd always been waiting for me, that he'd always been looking for me. Then he stayed with me, protecting me, just like he said he would. Even now, he's inside this spellstone, waiting to be woken up. ...I can tell."

Subaru: "But you can't speak with him, can you?"

Emilia: "He's still asleep. But it's not because he's denying a contract with me. I don't think this spellstone will work as his anchor if he's awake. It needs to be a higher grade, colourless spellstone. If I can just find one, and then something to trigger it... I know he'll come back."

A blue spellstone hangs on a pendant around Emilia's neck.

It's a piece of the massive spellstone that sealed Lewes Meyer. It proves insufficient for holding Puck, and the sleeping spirit cannot communicate with the outside.

As if his help during the Garfiel fight was really, truly his final contribution. Subaru: "I understand what's going on with Puck. But, about the Royal Selection?"

Emilia: "Me and Puck spent all that time in the frozen forest. Sometimes I went to the nearby towns too, but they weren't really very welcoming."

Subaru cannot even imagine how alienating that 'weren't really very' was. And it's doubtful that Emilia ever anticipated that she would speak of it.

Emilia: “Then Roswaal came... I think, not even a year ago yet. But it was so sudden that it left me and Puck sooo shocked.”

Subaru: “Well I'd be shocked too, if a guy in clown make-up popped up outta nowhere.”

Emilia: “That's true, but what shocked us was that he was in this inaccessible forest. I was on my way back from the village, and he was just standing there waiting for me. And he was playing dumb like always, like, 'weeeeeeeeeeeelcome back'...”

Subaru: “Well...”

That's certainly surprising.

It's too late to be commenting on Roswaal's mean-spiritedness, but Subaru can imagine the shock it gave Emilia and Puck at the time.

Emilia: “Puck got so cross... he went from morning to night, just fighting with Roswaal. Thinking back on it, it's a good thing he didn't freeze Roswaal solid.”

Subaru: “I mean your smile's adorable, but that's not really something to smile about.”

Emilia: “I guess. Anyway, Puck and Roswaal told each other what they wanted while they were fighting, and they managed to start a discussion...”

Subaru: "And Roswaal lured you in by proposing to melt the forest." Emilia's eyes widen. Subaru smiles wryly at her reaction.

Subaru: "It's obvious from how the story was going. And I happened to hear something along those lines before. But, y'know..."

But there's been a shift in Emilia's awareness since then.

Before, she said that she was incapable of freezing Elio Forest. That she was unable to thaw the ice, even with Puck's help.

However,

Subaru: "If you froze the forest, can't you unfreeze it?"

Emilia: "...Mm, I had that thought too. But I doubt I can." Subaru: "How come?"

Emilia: "I just can't reach the same power that I had in my memories."

It's an anxious, but confident statement. Subaru furrows his brows.

'The power I had in my memories'. If what Emilia's said is accurate, then that means power beyond human knowledge. Not even this witch Pandora could find an opening in Emilia's assault.

So how come Emilia doesn't have it now?

Subaru: "But you fought the Sizeable Hare without backing down an inch."

Emilia: "I don't need Puck or the minor spirits' help to cast magic any more. But that's all. I still can't draw that power out."

Subaru: “—”

Lamenting her powerlessness, Emilia clenches her fist and weakly shakes her head.

Her expression, ashamed of her inadequacy, instead shames Subaru for feeling dejected.

Emilia, of all people, is frustrated about herself. Subaru knows this, so he should not be capable of casting any criticism on her.

And it's not even that he wants Emilia to be strong, really.

Subaru: “OK, no more self-blame. Back to the topic. We'll agree that you can't melt the ice... so how is Roswaal thinking to do it?”

Emilia: “...”

Subaru: “If you can't do it and Puck can't do it, then Roswaal shouldn't be able to either. Maybe he's an amazing magician, but he can't be ten or twenty times stronger than you. So, how?”

Emilia: “It's not that Roswaal himself is melting the ice. But Roswaal knows something that might melt the ice... all he did was tell me about it.”

Subaru: “Something, that might melt it?”

Something that can thaw the forest that not even the Witch of Glaciation could melt, not even with a spirit's help, and not even with ultimate magical power. What on earth could it be?

Emilia: "Dragon's blood." Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "The blood of the Dragon, that grants bountiful harvests upon the land, and cures deviant earth. He said it could definitely thaw the forest."

Subaru: "Emilia, but that means..."

Killing the Dragon. Doesn't it?

She means to sacrifice the Dragon, which has always protected the Kingdom of Lugnica, for the sake of her forest?

For an instant, the incredible question rushes through Subaru's mind. But,

Emilia: "No, Subaru. I only need one drop of blood. And the Dragon's blood has been used to revitalize the soil during a famine in Lugnica before. I read that in a history book, so it's definitely true."

Subaru: "What, so... no, that seriously freaked me out for a second. I mean if we did something like kill the Dragon..."

Would that not free the Witch, sealed by the Dragon's power? Subaru: "—"

Anxiety clenches in Subaru's chest, and he forgets to breathe.

The witches he met at Echidna's tea party. And the Witch of Envy, who saw him off at the end. Subaru has not forgotten her.

He will never forget his resolve from their last instant of goodbye.

But she must not be let free.

She must not be loosed on the world. His instincts assuredly tell him so.

Emilia: "The royalty of Lugnica get a chance to talk to the Dragon when they

form the covenant. And some drops of the Holy Dragon Volcanica's blood have been kept in the palace, from back then. When I'm Ruler, I want to use that power.”

Subaru: “So that's why you're participating...”

Emilia: “...I told you before. The reason I'm participating is sooo selfish. And there my selfish reason is.”

He can hear a smile in her words, but it's an uneasy one. And her eyes do waver with anxiety as she looks up at him.

She looks scared of what he will say, and what he will think of her resolve.

It seems he's allowed to believe that he is such an implacable fixture to her, that he can make her feel this unease.

Subaru: “Don't worry, Emilia-tan. I'm not gonna get disillusioned over something like that.” Emilia: “...Subaru.”

Subaru: “You say it's self-centred, but you're not looking for your own gain. You know how to save people you want to save, and instead of dirtying your hands with something like theft, you decide to use legitimate methods. There's nothing to criticise about that.”

Subaru gives her a reassuring smile. But her expression remains anxious.

Subaru knows. This isn't what she wants to hear.

If he's going to give her something closer to what she's really looking for, then:

Subaru: “Are you shrinking back because you think your motivator is inferior to the other candidates’?”

Emilia: “—hk”

Subaru: “That's a case of grass's greener on the other side. Crusch-san's an amazing person with an amazing goal, yeah, but think about Anastasia-san and Priscilla. Their rationale'sre nothing praiseworthy.”

Greed and ego. That's what motivates them to participate.

Subaru wasn't there to hear it, but what venerable reason could Felt give to be participating in the Selection?

Emilia's desire to save people is not in any way inferior.

Subaru: “And no matter what you wanted at the start, it's something different now, isn't it?” Emilia: “...How can you tell?”

Subaru: “Because you were looking so peacefully at the banquet hall.”

Unfolding in the Milord banquet hall is a sight where humans and demihumans, nobles and servants and commoners, all interact without any division between race or class.

Subaru called it the ideal, and Emilia gazed at it with longing. Subaru knows exactly how the fire in Emilia's heart is kindled.

Subaru: “If your goal's to see that again, I'm helping you. I agree that it's wonderful. No one's gonna stop you from adding that onto your list of reasons for trying.”

Emilia: “You'll... really, help me?”

Subaru: “What do you think I just swore to you? Stop worrying, I want you to rely on me first. When you want help I'll help you, and when you're unsure we'll solve the problem together.”

Emilia: “—”

Emilia swallows her breath, her eyes wavering

What should she say? Her trembling lips cannot clearly state what she feels.
Emilia: “—Mm.”

So she mutters only that. And smiles.

—That's all I need, thinks Subaru.

Subaru: “Alright, my doubts are all vanished.”

With that, Subaru drinks what's left in the glass on the railing. Then he grabs his thoroughly-cooled meat pie, tosses it in his mouth, chews.

The cool cannot degrade this flavour, and the pie just melts in his mouth. Indeed this is a masterpiece that lives up to Garfiel's boasting.

Emilia: “Subaru, you'll choke if you eat so quickly.” Subaru: “I'll savour every bite if you feed it to me.”

Emilia: “I feel like I've done that somewhere before, when you were exhausted...”

Subaru grins somewhat wryly in response, and leads Emilia by the hand to the hall.

She looks up at the sky once, before accepting Subaru's escort and entering the hall alongside him. The party is still underway, and heats up with the star guests' return.

After bringing back a drunk Otto, Garfiel blacks out at the hands of Frederica and Ram's joint sneak attack, denying him his attempts to drink alcohol.

Petra and Beatrice's uncoordinated dance reaches its climax. Sweat drips from Petra's brow, and Beatrice is determined to put in an equal effort.

Anne-Rose looks displeased that Subaru has returned with Emilia, but Clind pokes his master's puffed cheeks, aggravating her.

Lewes and Roswaal stand side by side, toast to their repaired relationship, and sip from their glasses.

Subaru: "It's wonderful, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Yes. It's exactly what I want to see. I'll always remember it." So let's have a night to always remember.

They intrude on the two girls, dancing in the most conspicuous spot in the room. They don't know a single step, but they enjoy themselves all the same.

Through a sea of smiles and confusion, the Knight and Witch—the new master and servant—begin their nonsense dance.

Arc 5: Stars What Make History

Chapter 1: It Always Starts With A Visitor

—He breaks into a sprint, launching himself forward.

Air breezes over the sweat that drips from his brow to his eyes. He blinks it away, ignoring it. His lungs ache with every breath. His innards twist into knots.

He grits his teeth and dispels all his pain.

The only thing left in his mind is the world 'goal'.

“—!”

Someone is yelling far in the distance.

Their voice draws ever nearer, closing in on Subaru as he runs. With their call as his landmark, as his beacon, he sprints onward, onward—.

“—!”

The frantic voice draws him in. Heedless of the white light swamping his vision, he runs. And,

“Goal, in fact!”

The second he crosses the finish line clumsily drawn underfoot, the sky and

the earth swap places. Small weeds poke into the crown of his head, and Subaru instantly puts his hand to the ground for a forward roll. The habitual action kills his momentum, and with two more unneeded rolls, he lands sprawled out on the ground.

Subaru: “Bhaahhh! Auhhg! Everything hurts! Everything stings! But it's over! I did it!” Breathing breath after ragged breath, he still finds it in him to shout.

He complains as he does to invigorate his faltering heart. He mustn't feel that his fatigue is simply wear, or that his effort is simply exertion.

He must remember that this is not the end, and there is still more to come.

Every time he tries to dictate where the finish line is, to give himself that satisfaction, Subaru puts his hand to his chest and thinks of that night.

???: “Good job, Subaru, I suppose.”

A small silhouette enters Subaru's view from above.

A loveable girl with long, cream hair and an extravagant outfit—Beatrice.

Her fluttering dress looks out of place in the meadow as she presents Subaru with a towel. He accepts it and vigorously towels his head dry.

Subaru: “Ah, thanks. Was looking to cool down so this's perfect.”

Beatrice: “I'll tell you that Petra cooled it before you go pinning this on me, in fact. Go thank her and she'll jump for joy, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Petra's really considerate that way. But man, weird to see you out here, Beako. Something putting you in a different mood than usual?”

Subaru swings his arms as he sits up and slides over to Beatrice. She puts her

hand to her hip, averting her gaze.

Beatrice: “Just whimsy, in fact.”

Subaru: “Oh wow so it was whimsy huh.”

Beatrice: “...And I wanted to personally see what you're like when you're putting in your best, I suppose.”

While keeping her gaze averted, Beatrice easily unveils her hidden intentions.

She's so much more honest now. Subaru feels keenly that time has earned him her trust. Beatrice looks like she wants to say something to Subaru as he grins, but,

Beatrice: “Now, this must involve more than just gallivanting about, in fact. What comes next, I suppose?”

Subaru: “I'll have you know this gallivanting is pretty taxing on its own, mademoiselle. While I cannot say whether I'll meet your expectations, I'm tackling the obstacle course of dreams next.”

Beatrice: “...Ah, right, in fact. You mean the playground that Garfiel built in the forest, I suppose. 'Obstacle...?'”

Subaru: “Obstacle course. You don't have to force yourself to memorize it. Just ignore it.” Beatrice: “But Subaru, I want to understand every word you say, in fact.”

The smooth line makes Subaru's cheeks relax even further. Beatrice looks

puzzled by his reaction, before she realises what she just said and her expression instantly shifts. Her cheeks are adorably pink as berries.

Beatrice: “N-no, I didn't mean it like th... it just came out that way, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Nonono, no worries, I know exactly what you meant. Everything's cool, I love you too.” Beatrice: “You know exactly nothing, in fact!”

Subaru chuckles as he jumps to his feet and scoops a sour-faced Beatrice into his arms. She looks displeased in his hold, but makes no complaints about being carried.

Beatrice: “Subaru, you reek of sweat, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Breathe with your mouth then. Or just drain the mana directly.” Beatrice: “I'll sap you dry if that's what you're asking, in fact.”

Subaru: “You're gonna be the one crying after that.” Beatrice: “A-as if, I suppose! Cease your nonsense, in fact!” With Beatrice in his arms, Subaru breaks into a run.

His breathing returns to normal during their banter. Beatrice makes a perfect weight for running from the track in the field to the obstacle course in the forest.

Since she's far lighter than she looks. Basically a feather.

Subaru soars with her in hand, so light he may have grown wings.



Their new mansion is surrounded in just as much green as the old one.

Shrubs grow in abundance throughout the verdant mountains. Subaru feels the cool breeze wash over his bangs as he launches into a run.

Subaru: “Okay! All! Right!”

The forest is so lush that it drowns everything visible in green. Here, Subaru sprints forward and lightly puts his hand to a sideways log, defeating the obstacle with only a small hop and his momentum.

'Vaulting' proves an effective means of locomotion in places strewn with obstacles, or in urban areas with copious buildings. Parkour champions the technique: a sport that Subaru often watched on television, all while amazed at the superhuman feats of the athletes.

He never anticipated once that he would be training himself in this field.
Subaru: “Hup! Hah! Okay!”

The climbing apparatus is the star of this obstacle course that Subaru got Garfiel to construct.

One large post composes the central pillar, while logs are assembled together in the space around it. It is essentially a classical jungle gym but with a slight avant-garde flair.

The thing looks a mess to climb even while taking it slowly.

Subaru leaps onto it with all the momentum from his sprint, using the slight contact his fingers and toes purchase to shoot himself upwards, as if scaling a vertical wall.

He races quicker than the eye can catch all to the top of the jungle gym. But there still more to this stunt, and more purpose to the gym.

Subaru: “Hup! Hup! Hup!”

Subaru reaches the slight footing at the peak before hopping to the uppermost point of the structure. He gazes down. Drop looks about six meters.

Obviously, nothing is laid upon the wild, mossy ground. While the earth could have been soft once, it is now well-trodden and hard.

Meaning the terrifying fall is definitely going to hurt. However, Subaru: “—Hah!”

Without any hesitation, Subaru leaps down to the hard earth. Entirely undefended as he is, this jump may appear the worst of his usual recklessness.

But Subaru unhesitatingly stretches out his legs and contacts the ground. Suffering the pain of the impact, he writhes in hideous agony—or not.

Subaru “—”

Subaru bends his legs and ducks to dissolve the impact, breaking into a forward roll to further avoid damage. One more roll, and another onto his hands and knees, before he darts to his feet, sustaining no injury at all.

He merely brushes himself off, wiping the dirt from his track suit.

This is another parkour stunt: the land and roll.

The stunt involves a landing combined with a roll to disperse the impact.

It allows one to safely fall from moderate heights. While it's no big deal for superhumans, it is a question of life or death for ordinary human Subaru.

Just practising this technique should be broadening his horizons for what he can do. Subaru: “So that's basically it. That improve your opinion of me?”

Subaru spreads his arms wide and looks to Beatrice, who watched the whole thing. Beatrice sits calmly on the stump for spectators, her eyes widening.

Beatrice: “Honestly, I am a little surprised, in fact. It did improve my opinion somewhat, I suppose.”

Subaru: "You're back in love with me?"

Beatrice: "Subaru, recently, I've been having trouble deducing what you're trying to make me say, in fact!"

Subaru: "I only want to know you love me."

Beatrice's attitude already demonstrates it more than enough.

Subaru gives the red-faced, indignant Beatrice a smile before glancing behind him.

As shown by that spot of parkour, part of the forest has been repurposed into an obstacle course for Subaru.

No one's going to complain about it, since it's on Roswaal's land. But Subaru has to keep his honest urge to send Garfiel occupationally into construction, having seen how easily he cleared the timber and built this, to himself.

Garfiel is surprisingly nimble-fingered and attuned to detail. Perhaps his young, reckless talent will bloom in more fields in the future.

Subaru: "Anyway, guess we're calling it here for today." Beatrice: "Huwah, I suppose."

Subaru catches the towel that Beatrice throws to him, and wipes off his sweat as he did in the field. Then he stretches his legs, waist, so on. The old world already drove the importance of limbering up into him, but now that he's seriously exercising his body, he truly does feel the effects.

He can't do the splits, but he has grown more flexible.

He puts his foot to a nearby tree-trunk and stretches his body out. When he seats himself and spreads his legs, Beatrice walks over behind him and presses him down, letting him fall forward.

Subaru: “Done stretching. Alrighty, let's get ourselves back to the mansion and blob out.”

Beatrice: “Indeed, in fact.”

That comment would've earned him an insult before, but Beatrice accepts it without argument. She is both accustomed to how Subaru handles her, and to responding to it.

Beatrice reaches out for him. Subaru accepts, and hand-in-hand, they exit the forest.

Subaru: “Beako, are you holding back on the mana drain? It feels like you're taking less than usual.” Beatrice: “I'm at least considerate enough to take care when you're exhausted, I suppose.”

Subaru: “My my, how incredibly your opinion's changed in just these two short hours. But we don't want you to suffer from this, go back to the usual.”

Subaru smiles wryly at Beatrice as he lifts their linked hands. She glances aside at him and sighs. Instantly, the usual sensation hits.

Beatrice is directly entering the interior of Subaru's closed gate. This is the backdoor dedicated to extracting mana from Subaru, without passing through the gateway.

Only she can use this backdoor, and it is Subaru's lifeline.

Subaru's abused gate has completely stopped functioning.

But the loss of his gate does not stop his od from generating slight amounts of mana. Actually it is proceeding to generate more and more mana despite the lack of an outlet.

If left like this, the mana inside Subaru will frenzy, and he'll pop like an overinflated frog—is how he understands it.

But leaving aside whether he'll actually explode, Beatrice tells him it's dangerous. Since the mana exchange required to preserve their contract simultaneously resolves the issue, Subaru and Beatrice absolutely must have physical contact at least once daily.

Subaru is constantly stockpiling tiny loads of mana, and Beatrice needs mana to function. Both in terms of personality and constitution, their compatibility is excellent.

Although,

Subaru: “If you could mana drain people outside your contractor, we could easily keep you in mega loli mode.”

Beatrice: “Don't you go mulling over that, I suppose. I thought we came to an agreement about that ages ago, in fact. And you are amassing mana, even if it is in small amounts, I suppose. Even if it is tinier than a sparrow's teardrops.”

Beatrice has an idiosyncrasy where she only mana drains her contractor.

She had been constantly and randomly draining mana from people in Roswaal's mansion before, but apparently that involved using the Forbidden Archive as a mediator.

Beatrice: <The Forbidden Archive was arranged to mediate my mana intake,

draining it from entities inside the mansion, in fact.>

Was Beatrice's explanation.

So the plan to drain mana from Garfiel, who looks to abound in the stuff, or from Emilia, initially struggling with her vast pool of it, is a wash. It's like someone's silently telling him: of course it wouldn't work out that perfectly.

But, while it disappointed him at first, he's glad for it now.

Touching Beatrice is now a ritual representing more than just their relationship, and he likes feeling the truth of their connection.

The relationship between Subaru the spiritualist and Beatrice the spirit differs somewhat from those of normal spiritualists. They need to recognize how their partnership represents them, by doing things like this.

Beatrice: "I'm done, in fact. This is enough to fill me for today, I suppose."

Subaru: "Oh, kay, haauh... nothing, to it... haa... haa..."

Beatrice: "I've already decided not to comment when it comes to your bravado, in fact."

Done with their daily ritual, Beatrice gazes flatly at Subaru.

They step off the forest trail and onto paved ground, proving that they're close to the mansion. The path resembles the one from Arlam Village times, but now that it crosses through the nearby town of Costuul, it all feels far less remote.

Beatrice: "If I were going to pick, I'd say I preferred the quiet forest, I suppose."

Subaru: "I think noisy towns and quiet forests both have their appeal. I wouldn't pick one over the other. But since the Capital's the only big city I've

seen yet, Costuul feels pretty novel.”

Beatrice: “Hrmpf, in fact. Subaru, your ideas are mismatched with Betty's, I suppose.” Beatrice pouts in clear dissatisfaction.

Subaru pulls her onward, chiding her with a “yeah yeah” as he heads towards the path to the mansion. When,

???: “—Subaru-sama! Beatrice-chan!”

Someone shouts their names, and the two of them look up. They find a girl running towards them from the road to the mansion.

Her face and voice are familiar, and her adorable expression brightens upon sighting Subaru and Beatrice. Her auburn, shoulder-length hair flutters in the wind.

The catlike roundness of her eyes give her expressive face even more charm. Anyone would catch themselves smiling at her friendly, lovable attitude.

A sweet wildflower, out of anyone's reach.

That would be a good descriptor for Petra Leyte.

Petra: “I was just leaving to go fetch you two. Thank goodness we didn't miss each other.” Says Petra after running up to them, out of breath with her hand to her chest.

Subaru gives Petra, who had grown to his chest, a pat on the head in response.

Subaru: “What's the rush? We weren't gonna escape. Did you just get those baked tarts at the perfect temperature for us or something?”

Beatrice: “Then it's sensible that she would make haste, in fact. Since it's

incredibly important, I suppose.”

Petra: “No! That's so not it! You guys are being jerks!”

Petra puffs out her cheeks as Beatrice nods solemnly, and goes to remove Subaru's hand from her head. But once her hands clasp his own, she stops.

She keeps that hold on Subaru's hand, cheeks flushed red as she continues,

Petra: “Leaving the tarts aside for the moment, it's something else. The mansion has received a guest. Emilia-sama said to go and fetch you, and...”

Subaru: “Wait, Petra. Just stop there. I'm getting a terrible feeling about this.”

Petra: “Huh?”

Clearly wary, Subaru cuts Petra off.

She looks surprised at this, but Beatrice doesn't.

Well yeah. Beatrice has witnessed the same things that Subaru has, considering they've been together ever since moving to the new mansion.

Quite a few things have happened between now and the day they left SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “And the conversation pattern goes exactly the same. When you show up to fetch me, or Frederica does, or sometimes Otto or Garfiel do, it always means trouble. I've learned that much.”

Beatrice: “A guest suddenly appears while Subaru is out... indeed, this absolutely is the pattern bespeaking misfortune, I suppose.”

Petra: “B-Beatrice-chan, you're using words that Subaru-sama does...! Subaru-sama, stop teaching her weird things!”

Subaru: "The mansion's consensus is that Beako gets to do what she wants. But anyway, the guest. Petra, me and Beatrice are absent due to stomach-ache."

Petra: "No! You! Don't! Emilia-sama will be furious! And I have no reason to disobey her. Come on, this way!"

Petra used to be such a Subaru adherent, but living here has led her to oppose him when needed.

Her hands grab Subaru's arm and she pulls him along, putting in her greatest effort to drag him away. As she does, Subaru glances to Beatrice, her hand in his.

Subaru: "Beako."

Beatrice: "Enjoy your day, in fact." Subaru: "You're coming too!" Beatrice: "Ghhah, I suppose!"

It starts as a plea for help, and instantly transforms into embroilment. Beatrice quickly attempts to shake him off, but Subaru keeps a tight grip on her left hand. And her right hand is restrained by Petra, leaving her doubly without an escape.

With Subaru refusing Beatrice's escape, and Petra refusing Subaru's escape, the trio venture along in their nonsense arrangement to the mansion.

Subaru: "I know it's too late to kick the visitor out... but that just makes me wish we'd been told sooner."

Petra: “You mean, to have a messenger on messengers? But then we won't know far we need to go out to anticipate them beforehand. That much is clear.”

Subaru: “I'm just saying it'd be nice for everyone's mental health and relations if we did something about that. Anyway, do you know who today's visitor is, Petra?”

The one receiving the guest is going to be Petra, Frederica, or Ram. One of the three. Since Petra is out here fetching Subaru, one of the other two will be dealing with the guest.

Petra: “Umm, well, not really...”

Subaru: “You don't know? Maybe you didn't see their crest, but you'd have to've seen the messenger. And even if you didn't I'm sure they would've told you something when they told you to fetch us...”

Petra: “They were in an incredible rush, saying that the guest was extremely important. But they didn't look important.”

Subaru: “You can't judge much off of people's appearances. Sometimes you get little girls with powerful drills who also command dark powers. Though they may seem a mere dress-wearing loli, in truth they preside over—”

Beatrice: “Shut it, I suppose!”

Beatrice is the one calling off the jokes, leaving Subaru silent. Petra looks at

the silenced Subaru, still worried.

Petra: "I don't judge people based on their appearances anymore either."

Subaru: "That's good, Petra. Dunno what happened to change it but it was important you did."

Petra: "I thought the new nasty-eyed choresman who came to the village was a weirdo... but he really wasn't."

Subaru: "It boomeranged!"

Stricken somewhere that he didn't expect, Subaru tilts his head at Petra. Nevermind her first impressions of him, the stuff she mentioned earlier is important.

Petra doesn't judge people by their appearance, but she still thought this visitor was odd. Subaru: "So what're they like?"

Petra: "I guess... a kitty?" Subaru: "A kitty?"

The image of a grey cat spirit, long tail wagging, comes to mind at the word 'kitty'. Subaru's

feelings for him are complex, and there are things they must talk about upon his eventual return. Subaru: "Gotta ask him for his daughter."

Beatrice: "I thought of Bubby too, but Petra's surely seen him before, I suppose. So it can't be him, in fact. Petra, what kind of kitty was it, I suppose?"

Petra: "It's so cute that you're calling them a kitty too, Beatrice-chan."
Beatrice: "Pet! Ra!"

Says Beatrice indignantly to a teasing Petra.

Petra gives an easy, “Sorry, sorry,” and looks up in thought.

Petra: “I guess they weren't really a kitty. I haven't really seen one before, but I suppose they were a catfolk demihuman. I always think of Big Bro Garfiel when I think of demihumans though.”

Subaru: “Garf's mixed race, and he doesn't have any blatantly obvious demihuman traits. Best you can manage on closer inspection is how intense his eyes are.”

And I guess you could mention his sharp canines.

According to Garfiel, his canines will always keep growing, much like a rodent's incisors, and he needs to chew on hard objects to maintain their length and sharpness.

It's not uncommon for Ram or Frederica to flip out at him after catching him chewing on the mansion's bannisters.

Subaru: “So a demihuman who looks demihuman has arrived. If they're catfolk then they're probably a beastman, and I do know a couple of those.”

It's a given in the Capital, but Costuul also has many beastfolk demihumans.

A long period of time has dissolved the discrimination against demihumans in the domain of Roswaal the Demihuman Fancier. Making this area a nicer region for demihumans to live in, or so says the local bunny-eared bartender.

But Petra, who spends her time working in the mansion and goes to Arlam Village rather than Costuul on her days off, naturally is less familiar with them.

Petra: “I get it. Could you show me around Costuul on my next day off, then?”

Subaru: “Yeah, sure. I'm sure you'll get to go there for shopping and stuff too, and you wanna be making as many friends as you can.”

Subaru gives that poorly-thought promise, and Petra pumps her fist. Beatrice only sighs and smiles wryly at Subaru.

Subaru: “Aaaand we're here. Back at our beloved abode.”

The gates come into view during their conversation, and Subaru lifts his hands, linked as they are with the girls'. He ignores their protests as the gesture forces them to stretch, correcting his own posture and looking at the mansion.

This is the new mansion replacing the old, burnt one. Its exterior gives the same western feel that the previous did, and is similarly designed.

There is space between the front gates and the doorway, with garden lawns flanking the gravel path. On the right side is a fountain, while the left continues into a path to the side end of the mansion, where carriages are parked, that has stables for earth dragons.

The fountain comes with an installation of colourful flowers, and at a fixed time daily, it sprinkles them with water. One section of the flowerbed holds Subaru and Petra's vegetable garden, letting them harvest fresh vegetables in-season. It's quite well-praised when the crop is bountiful.

The group pass through the front garden and the gravel path, leading them to large double-doors. The knocker shares the shape of the Mathers family crest, using the raptor motif, which indeed makes this feel like the primary estate of the Mathers.

Subaru: "I noticed an unfamiliar carriage over by the stables. Guess it's the visitor's."

Petra: "The carriage is a dragon carriage, but it wasn't being pulled by anything like Patrasche-chan. It wasn't a dragon, it was more like a big dog."

Subaru: "Pulled by a big dog... actually, maybe it's..."

Thinking back on his internal bestiary, Subaru gets a clue of the visitor's identity. But before he can reach a definite answer, the solution ends up finding him.

Which is to say,

???: "Oh! Hullo mister, it's been foooreeeveeer! Have you been well!?"

A stupidly cheerful, high-pitched voice comes hurtling at Subaru, startling him as he opens the door. Petra gives a wry smile, and Beatrice squeezes Subaru's hand slightly. With these reactions in the corner of his eye, he looks ahead at the figure bounding toward him.

They are small.

They are shorter than Petra, but a little taller than Beatrice. Meaning that they're a child's height, but this may be as tall as she'll ever get.

Her body is covered in short, orange fur, and her alert cat ears are adorable. Her eyes abound with curiosity and her loud mouth is curved mischievously. Her long, orange braid is very feminine, and her perfectly-fit white robe makes her all the more cute.

She's effectively a bipedal kitten, and in some sense, a cat-lover's dream. A catfolk—and one who Subaru knows.

Subaru: “Mimi! It's been ages. You're as full of energy as always!”

Mimi: “Mhm! Yup! I'm super duper full of energy! You get it, mister! And I even grew bigger and now I'm an adult. Hmhmhm!”

Mimi puts her hand to her hip, smirking boastfully as her tail sways to and fro.

She just looks like a lively, energetic girl, but actually she is a vice-chair of the beastman mercenary company Iron Fang, with considerable fighting prowess and many other surprises.

She once helped Subaru in fighting the White Whale and Betelgeux, and shares his tendency to be cloyingly friendly and familiar with anyone, which perhaps makes her the best friend he unaffectedly made during the whole affair.

Incidentally Iron Fang is basically the private army of Emilia's political opponent Anastasia Hoshin,

so they are an enemy going by that.

But being hostile towards Mimi is entirely tasteless.

Subaru: “Thanks for coming all the way. Right, introductions. This cute maid here is Petra. She's an upcoming almighty maid who works in our mansion. And this blatantly wary loli is Beatrice.”

Mimi: “Okey! I got it! The maid who's Petras and your baby! Got it! I won't

forget it!” Beatrice: “I-I feel she's remembering me by hideously improper means, in fact...!”

Beatrice is trembling, hiding behind Subaru's back. It seems she's scared of Mimi and how unforgivingly forward she is. Mimi mercilessly dives into her,

Mimi: “What? You'll never be big like me if you shrink up like that! Come on, get out here, out you get!”

Beatrice: “Wh, no, wa, stop, I suppose! Betty doesn't mind being small, and you're too small to be saying this anyway, in fact!”

Mimi: “Hmhm! Listen to the rookie. I'm huge inside, so my outsides're gonna catch up to me before long! The Boss said so!”

Beatrice: “It's nonsense, I suppose!”

Mimi pulls Beatrice to the front, manhandling her entirely.

Beatrice looks to Subaru for rescue, but he enjoys watching her being people-shy while also making friends, and simply watches over her with a fatherly look.

Petra: “Um, Subaru-sama. Beatrice-chan is looking to you in sheer terror.”

Subaru: “People mature by battling their weaknesses. Beako is a little too averse to new things, so it's best she start developing that challenger's mentality now. Let us watch her in silence, mom.”

Petra: “M-mom... y-yes, let's.”

Subaru senses his mistake as he sees Petra blush and fall silent. But correcting it would be a mess so he decides to go with it.

He turns his attention to Mimi, dancing circles around the room with a tight grip on Beatrice's hands.

Subaru: "So if you're here, then are the others... are your brothers or Ricardo with you? Also I'd really rather goddamn Julius not show up without booking in first."

Anastasia's Knight, Julius Euclius, has a very complicated relationship with Subaru. Subaru doubts he can be sincere with him even when seeing him face-to-face.

Subaru knows he has some trouble dealing with Anastasia, but she's still preferable to Julius. But Mimi casts aside Subaru's worries with a shake of her head.

Mimi: "Nope. Not Hetaro or Tivey or the Boss or Julius or my Lady are here! It's just me! I'm here all on my own! Hmhm!"

Subaru: "That's impressive and all, but... what are you here for, then?"

Mimi: "Ummm, uhhh, oh right!"

Mimi tilts her head, before pouncing onto Beatrice. Heedless of Beatrice as she hurries to support her, Mimi gives a sunny smile,

Mimi: "I'm inviting you to a party! My Lady said let's all hang out! So here I am to invite you! I'm super excited! Super! Excited!"

Chapter 2: Pedigree Of The Poseur

Subaru tilts his head, Mimi merrily waving her arms as she takes the lead. 'Party' is a pretty extravagant word, and it's coming out of nowhere.

Subaru: "A party invite... from Anastasia-san? But that's still like, what happened? Is there something to celebrate?"

Mimi: "Celebrate? Celebritty? Whatever! Who cares, it'll be so much fun eating food and getting drunk! So much! Fun!"

Subaru: "You're clearly too young to be drinking."

Mimi: "Heeheehee. I'm an adult as of this year! The Boss says I can drink! But my Lady says I can't."

Mimi puffs out her chest, and the belled ornaments in her hair chime. Subaru's eyes shoot open in shock,

Subaru: "What, you're allowed to drink, then you're fully grown!? No way. How old are you!" Mimi: "I just turned fifteen! So I'm an adulty adult. I'm a big girl!"

Subaru: "Big girls don't talk like they're still in grade school! But anyway..."

Having regained some composure, Subaru puts his hand to his chest as he recognizes the differences in adulthood between this world and the old one. It's essentially the same as genpuku. The age of adulthood is about fifteen in this world, and that's when it's legal to drink and smoke.

Subaru: "...would be the right way to consider it, Petra?"

Petra: "Yes, that's right. But going into more detail, boys leave their homes and find work at fifteen, while some girls start getting married around then. If they don't get married, it's also when they'll usually start working. Like me."

Subaru: "Which means you left your home pretty early. You're a feisty girl, you." Petra: "Heehee, I'm feis... I don't think that was a compliment."

Petra glares at Subaru, who heads over to an exhausted Beatrice. Mimi has released her, and her pigtails are in some disarray. She looks bitterly up at Subaru.

Beatrice: "After participating in your training and being manhandled by this cat, Betty is exhausted, I suppose... Subaru, carry me, in fact."

Subaru: "Participating? All you did was watch..."

Beatrice spreads her arms out, reaching for Subaru, and he scoops her into his arms. He's more muscular than he used to be, and since she's light as a feather, the weight doesn't bother him at all. Though, he does sort of look like a dad cradling his daughter now, which is not ideal.

Mimi: "Oooh! You're holding the baby! That's awesome! Hold me too! Me too!"

Subaru: "Your Boss'd be another story, but I physically can't do it. Request denied." Mimi: "What! That's no fair! No fair! Unfair! Unfair!"

Mimi scampers around Subaru as he holds Beatrice. For some reason Beatrice smiles victoriously. Eventually Mimi grabs onto Subaru's track suit,

Mimi: “Okey then! I'll just climb up!”

Subaru: “Idiot! Stop, you'll topple me over. Petra help me stop he—what're you doing?”

Petra: “Ah, erm, I'm not jealous or anything. I'm not. But would you mind if I climbed you, Subaru-sama?”

Subaru: “Um yes!?”

Subaru holds a little girl, with a kitten girl and a maid girl pursuing him incessantly. The shenanigans in the foyer continue without resolution.

When,

???: “—I thought you were taking forever to return, and here you are monkeying about in the foyer.”

The frigid voice makes Subaru and Petra stand up straight.

Mimi's eyes sparkle with curiosity for the new speaker, while Beatrice sighs.

The voice is coming from the stairway overlooking the foyer. Subaru glances up to find a girl standing there, where she can see the four of them

She has pink hair, and wears a short-cut maid outfit. Her cerise eyes look apathetic, and though she is cute, there is nothing cuddly about her.

This is Petra's colleague, Ram, the head of the maids in the mansion. She gazes coldly at Subaru and snorts a breathy, “Ha.”

Ram: "Filthy."

Subaru: "You're the filthy one for reaching that conclusion! Maybe you can argue about how sound this is, but it's still a heartwarming scene!"

Ram: "You always bend reality to suit your purposes. But, Barusu, you mustn't forget. —I judge only by what I've seen."

Subaru: "Maybe you could take off your weird filter before you start looking please?"

Ram glances at him disinterestedly, apparently unwilling to hear him out. She ignores the stunned Subaru and looks over at Petra, who instantly starts to quake.

Ram: "Petra. I told you to drag Barusu here by the neck if you had to. Would you like to explain why you are playing with him in the foyer?"

Petra: "I-I'm sorry, Sister Ram."

Ram: "It seems you weren't listening, Petra. I believe I asked, why are you dawdling here in the foyer?"

Subaru: "Stop acting like the sister from hell. It was just me screwing around. Petra's not to blame." Ram: "Of course she's to blame. I'll pummel you, Barusu."

Subaru: "She's only a little to blame!"

Pleased with that concession, Ram jerks her chin to the room behind her.

Ram: "You mustn't keep Emilia-sama waiting. Barusu, to the upstairs parlour. Petra, the dining room. Beatrice-sama, accompany Barusu."

Beatrice: "Of course, I suppose."

Mimi: "What about me? Come on, what about me?"

Petra regretfully lets go of Subaru's sleeve, but he remains caught in the energetic catgirl's firm grip. Ram brushes aside her hair, caught on her cheek.

Ram: "I ask you accompany Barusu to the parlour, dear guest. I'm afraid that your companion is unsettled by your absence."

Mimi: "Hokay. Guess I gotta go back then. I done a no do."

Even Ram is polite when receiving guests. Mimi laughs boisterously in reply, but Subaru catches something that he can't ignore.

Subaru: "Companion? But I thought you said you were alone?"

Mimi: "I did, and I am. Not Hetaro or Tivey or the Boss or Julius or my Lady are here. But Joshua's here. I'm alone being Joshua's boddygar, boddygard?"

Subaru: "Bodyguard?"

Mimi: "Yes! Boddygard!"

Mimi puffs out her chest, smirking. Subaru pats her head before looking back up at Ram. Subaru: "I'm sorry. I was so sure it was only Mimi. I didn't realise I was making someone wait." Ram: "So it seems. It's fine, but do hurry. Emilia-sama's patience will tire before long."

Subaru: "Can't have that. Okay, see you later Petra. Let's go, Mimi." Mimi: "Whoo!"

Who is this mysterious Joshua?

He must be someone from Anastasia's faction who Subaru doesn't know. If they're sending him as a messenger, and appointing Mimi as his bodyguard, he must have suitable rank.

He could have an important post if Mimi refers to him without an honourific, but then again

considering how indiscriminately friendly Mimi is, it doesn't exactly indicate much.

Petra: "I'll bake the tarts once everything has settled down. You will taste them, won't you, Subaru-sama?"

Whispers Petra before darting out of the scene.

Frederica must be waiting for her in the dining room. Subaru doesn't know whether they'll serve food in the parlour, but either way, it seems like it's going to be a while before he gets to eat Petra's tarts.

Subaru: "Who else is in the parlour with Emilia-tan?"

Ram: "Roswaal-sama has not returned yet, which leaves her with Otto and Garf. If the visitor is an assassin in disguise, Garf will be enough to manage them."

Subaru: “Doubt we need to be so worried about direct attacks. I already told Emilia-tan to use Otto as a human shield.”

Ram: “If I ever feel in danger, that's what I'll do too.”

There are no words for how they treat Otto. Well actually no there are.

Either way, if those three are the ones in the parlour, Otto must be stuck pulling more than his weight. Should they neglect to lessen the strain upon him swiftly, they are liable to lose their precious Internal Affairs Minister.

Beatrice: “He never gets his reward, I suppose. I don't understand why he's even friends with you, in fact.”

Subaru: “It might be invisible to others, but me and Otto are tied together with a solid bond of masculine friendship. Rock solid.”

Mimi: “Ooh! Rocka solid!”

Ram's sigh guides the three up to the parlour: the very first room after scaling the foyer staircase. Ram knocks on the door, which then opens from inside. The face that peeks out belongs to,

Garfiel: “There yer are, Captain. Yer were takin' so long I was thinkin' I'd haveta go'n get ya.”

Subaru: “It would've been funny if you all said you were leaving to look for me and left Otto there on his own.”

Garfiel: “Crap, it wouldda. Now'm imaginin' him panicking everywhere n' freakin' out.”

Garfiel, with his short blond hair, sharp fangs, and characteristic forehead scar, shares a mischievous grin with Subaru.

He jerks his chin, his arms crossed, apparently keeping himself posted at the door.

Garfiel: “Get in here. Th'guest's sayin' y'gotta be here if we're gonna talk. Otto n' Emilia-sama were tryin' t'give 'im a welcome, but it all juss looked like a comedy.”

Subaru: “Honestly I'd want to see that.”

Ram: “Cease this foolishness and enter the room. We're already delayed.”
Subaru: “Guh”

Ram drives her foot into the small of Subaru's back, and he goes stumbling into the room. His odd posture as he bursts into the scene earns him stares from those in the parlour.

The predominant emotions are relief, exasperation, and confusion, respectively.

Subaru suppresses his urge to make excuses to the relieved and exasperated parties about his tardiness, and turns to face the confused individual.

???: “—”

The prim, handsome man gazes back at Subaru.

A well-tailored outfit garbs his slender frame, and his long violet hair is tied in

a ponytail. He exerts a scholarly air, and his monocle only supports that impression.

His yellow eyes are rather sharp, and between that and his pout at he peers at Subaru's unfamiliar face, he looks displeased.

Neither party makes the best first impression on the other. Man: “And this would be...?”

The visitor is the one to speak first.

He looks away from Subaru, and to the two people seated before him. A beautiful girl, with silver hair flowing down her back, is the one to nod and answer him.

Emilia: “Right. I apologize that he arrived late. —This is my Knight, Natsuki Subaru.” A tingle shoots down Subaru's spine.

The words 'My Knight' are simply so wonderful that they captivate him every time. Man: “M-May I point out that he seems, ah, enraptured...?”

Beatrice: “Subaru. Stop making funny faces, I suppose. He's going to think... huh? Erm this feels quite forceful, in fact. No, you're, holding too tight—Suba—Subaru! Ow! Ouch, I suppose!”

Subaru: “—Aah! Ahh, sorry. Was tripping.”

He had almost unwittingly squeezed Beatrice to death to distract himself from his feelings. A Beako Hug or also a bear hug. That's what it was.

Anyway. The guest looks on sceptically as Subaru clears his throat and puts down Beatrice.

Subaru: “As stated a moment previously, I am Natsuki Subaru. I serve as Knight to Emilia-sama, who makes her presence before you. It pleases me to make your acquaintance.”

Man: “—”

The track suit makes it a little slovenly, but his manners align perfectly with courtly etiquette.

He used to think cynically of the pretentious attitudes of knights, but now that he's trying it himself, he finds it works surprisingly well for him.

It's not a question of whether it suits him or not. It's that he feels himself being more of a knight. The pressure, knowing that one misstep will leave him a laughingstock, gives the rigid seriousness meaning.

Under the tutelage of Garfiel, with his extensive knowledge as a Knight Fanatic, Subaru has fostered etiquette that disgraces him not as a knight.

Subaru glances to the door to find Garfiel watching him, satisfied.

Garfiel notices Subaru's glance and flips him the bird. Subaru taught him the gesture, but he's using it wrong. While he may be a good teacher, Garfiel is a failure of a student.

Man: “You humble me. I am... I myself am Joshua Euclius, visiting you as an envoy on behalf of Anastasia Hoshin-sama.”

Subaru: “Then you would be Joshua-san. What a fine name. Still, I must apologize for my poor punctuality. Allow me to—Euclius?”

Halfway through the diplomatic fineries, Subaru finds himself tilting his head at the familiar word. Joshua nods with a, “Yes,” and adding onto that,

Emilia: “That's right, Subaru. Joshua is Julius's little brother. And they're both

supporting Anastasia together, it's sooo sweet.”

Laughs the girl, her chaste demeanour gone, and her speech far more casual.

Her face as she looks at Subaru is her true face, naturally. Subaru sighs, staring impolitely at Joshua as he seats himself opposite him.

As he seats himself beside Emilia, like it's natural.

Subaru: “What, so he's Julius's brother. Actually now that you mention it they are pretty alike. You have that disdainful... or not, intense, gaze of his. Or that mocking... or not, elegant, smile of his. Or that hellish... or not, pretty, hair colour of his.”

Otto: “If you need force it every time then would you care to refrain from commenting!?” Says Otto, unable to hide his sweat.

He's the Head Minister of the Emilia Faction's Internal Affairs, or more rather he's the only one capable of being said minister so that's why he has the title. But diplomacy terrifies him immensely.

Subaru: “Did you lose weight?”

Otto: “Life here is simply too exhilarating, yes! When things in this exact vein keep happening in constant succession, the mental fatigue leaves me too exhausted to exercise, and thus skeletal!

Skeletal!”

Mimi: “Skellytall! Skellytall!”

Cheers Mimi, unintentionally aggravating Otto further.

It looks like the only thing keeping Otto quiet is the fact that Mimi is the

guest's companion. She disregards him entirely as she scampers over and leaps onto the seat, beside Joshua.

Beatrice also looks at the seats.

But Subaru, Emilia, and Otto are fully occupying the seat opposite Joshua and Mimi. They could scooch together to open room for Beatrice, but it would look lame. And so Beatrice promptly seats herself on Subaru's lap.

Subaru naturally loops his hands around Beatrice's waist, making sure she won't fall.

Subaru: "Now, finally getting to the main topic..." Joshua: "P-Please wait! Who is this girl?"

And Joshua winds up too flustered to talk.

He points at Beatrice, sitting on Subaru's lap, and leans forward so forcefully that his monocle slips. Apparently he lacks Julius's composure.

Subaru decides that he prefers this to Julius, while Mimi instead speaks up.

Mimi: "Geez, you're so behind, Joshua. This is Beako, she's Subaru's baby. It's so obvious. And beside him's the mommy, and beside her's the housekeeper?"

Otto: "Honestly I am far too unconfident about what my current standing is to be hearing that I'm the housekeeper so would you please care to stop?!"

Mimi: "Housekeeper! Housekeeper! Wow! It's like a witchbeast name!"

Otto's pleas are entirely ineffective on Mimi, the embodiment of dumb innocence.

Nobody bothers to react to Otto, who slumps his shoulders. Subaru puts his hand on Beatrice's head.

Subaru: "Sorry for not introducing her. We're just so used to sitting like this that I completely forgot to explain."

Emilia: "Otto-kun forgot to mention it too. And it caught me unawares as well." Subaru: "Who says caught me unawares anymore?"

It's Emilia's usual phrasing, but Subaru agrees with the sentiment. And Otto must be getting so accustomed to this life that he's forgetting to interject with common sense. It's a good problem to have.

Subaru: "This is Beatrice. Mimi's right, she's the child of myself and Emilia-sama." Joshua: "What!?"

Joshua, aghast.

Emilia: "Geez. No she's not, Subaru. Look at how you shocked Joshua. I know we kissed but you can't make babies by kissing. I've been studying."

Subaru: "Ah, sorry, Emilia-tan. I think some private stuff just got thrown right into the open. It was my bad so I'll just introduce her normally."

Beatrice: "This is what you get for using me for tomfoolery, in fact. You best regret it, I suppose." Subaru forces a smile at Emilia and Beatrice.

Emilia's misunderstandings about making babies have only been rectified when it comes to 'making babies by kissing'. Subaru couldn't go any further into the topic, and, anticipating the shock the subject would give Emilia, the faction's women decided to wait until she's more mentally mature.

Basically everyone is overprotective.

Joshua: "Ehrm... so, Miss Beatrice's true station would be...?"

Joshua fixes his monocle, overwhelmed with his initiation to Roswaal Mansion and its people. But shouldn't the unruliness of everyone here be pretty close to

Anastasia's Faction, which has Iron Fang?

Subaru: “I'm sorry that the conversation keeps slipping. Beatrice may look like an ordinary, lovable little girl, but she is actually my contracted spirit. She is a loligranny.”

Beatrice: “Exactly, I'm a spirit, in fact. And I know that you're mocking me with that word 'loligranny', I suppose.”

Beatrice brushes Subaru's hand aside and digs her head into the underside of his chin. She has grown rather proficient in Subaruese, making verbal gaffes generally impermissible.

'Loligranny' is just a combination of 'granny' and 'loli', a word that he has already explained to her, so of course she saw through this one.

Joshua's reaction to Subaru and Beatrice's heartwarming exchange is extreme. His prudish but charming face falls frigid.

Joshua: “—I see. She's a spirit.”

Nobody who catches his whisper can decode his sentiment.

It's not that he's hiding his emotions. It's the opposite. The emotion is so convoluted and complex that it's impossible to tell what lies at its core.

But everyone can see that it was not a very friendly statement.

Garfiel: “Hey, guest. You got a problem with our Captain havin' a spirit with him?” Garfiel has inherited Subaru's old role. Which is, practising disrespect to anyone.

While everyone else deliberates on how to address the problem, he fearlessly

dives right in. Joshua promptly shakes his head,

Joshua: “No. It's nothing important. Just, it struck me that Natsuki-dono is a Spirit Knight. As I myself am sure you already know, my brother is a Spirit Knight. The title is so rare that you could call him the only holder in the nation.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I know. When we were fighting the Witch Cult, he... um, he. He really hel... h-hel— ghk. Helped me, out a... lot, so...”

Otto: “Are you truly so reluctant to accept that he saved you!?”

No. But thinking back on his battles with Julius makes him feel awkward about what he's saying, and makes the old wounds from his beatdown sting.

Beatrice: “I heard that there was another knight who uses spirits, in fact. What an odd turn of fate for it to be your brother, I suppose.”

Joshua: “What do you mean by 'odd turn of fate'. Spirit.”

Beatrice: “It's obvious what I mean, in fact. Precursors are destined to be excelled, I suppose. His best place is as an ornament on the glorious road that Subaru and I—nhaaha!”

Subaru: “Don't pick fights with people we just met. And I've got nothing on Julius. I'm never gonna beat him in what he does. I don't beat people who're good at puzzles by challenging them to puzzles, I beat them by challenging them to Mario Kart.”

Subaru musses Beatrice's hair and bows his head to Joshua. While pushing

Beatrice's head into a bow as well.

Subaru: "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make a fool of your brother. Or really, I know that I'm less capable than him. This spirit here is just being a braggart."

Joshua: "An admirable, and correct judgement. When comparing yourself to my brother, it's natural to recognize your inferiority."

Subaru: "Uh?"

Subaru was looking to make a mature compromise, but Joshua's abrupt arrogance makes things precarious again.

Heedless of Subaru as he furrows his brows in confusion, Joshua catches the light on his monocle,

Joshua: "Yes. My brother is amazing. At the age of twenty is the second most capable of the Imperial Knights, the finest Order of Knights of the Kingdom. His service to Anastasia-sama currently distances him from his station as an Imperial Knight, but once her wishes are fulfilled he will be secured a place as Head of the Imperial Knights. He has a close, amiable relationship with the Sword Saint Reinhardt, and holds himself impeccably in both public and private contexts. He is strict on himself and others, disciplined, ambitious, always seeking improvement. His beautiful looks enrapture scores of women, and his personality is accordingly excellent. Yes. My brother is amazing. You're nothing compared to him."

Subaru: "...uh."

Joshua speaks with passion, his face red as he goes on and on and on.

Subaru has no reply, and Beatrice recoils too. Garfiel and Otto stay silent, unsure whether this could get deadly, and Mimi is too busy stuffing her cheeks with snacks to help him out of this.

There is only one person here who can counter Joshua's screed. Emilia:
“Heehee. Joshua, you love your brother Julius sooo much.”

In this room exists an angel who will take anything positively.

Her words make Joshua realise what he just said, and his face reddens in shame rather than excitement. He clears his throat, managing to compose himself.

Joshua: “M-My apologies. I may have fired myself up. I have some difficulty restraining myself when it comes to my family.”

Emilia: “No, it's okay. I want to hear you talk about Julius more. I've only ever seen Julius while in the Capital here and there, so there's lots more I want to know about him.”

Joshua: “R-Really! Well, there are several memories of me and him that—”

Subaru: “How about we save those for another occasion, and finally get to the point!? How does that sound, Otto! Garfiel!”

Both: “Huh!?”

Subaru cuts in, forcing the other two into the conversation while they pleadingly try to stay out of it. But they do promptly nod in agreement.

Joshua then notices that the conversation has strayed incredibly far, and,

Joshua: “T-Then, we will save the stories of my brother's magnificence for

another time. I must... I myself must also fulfil my duties and reconvene with Anastasia-sama shortly.”

Emilia: “Right. I'm sooo excited for them. So, it really took us a long time to finally get here... but what is this visit all about?”

Joshua's awkwardness lingers as he feigns calm, while Emilia easily enters Royal Selection Candidate Mode.

The tone of their voices drop, bringing a tenseness to the parlour. Emilia can establish tension like this because she has come to recognize her place as a budding politician.

Joshua: “—I speak to Emilia-sama on the behalf my master, Anastasia Hoshin-sama.”

The prickly tension makes Joshua's expression regain its former warmth. He puts his hand in his pocket, withdraws a letter, and sets it on the table.

He opens it. Looks down at the letters and their black ink.

Joshua: “Anastasia-sama wishes to invite yourself and all of your associates to the city of Pristella.”

Emilia: “An invitation to Pristella City... Pristella is the Watergate City, yes? The big city near the border between the Kingdom of Lugnica and the Kararagi City-States.”

Joshua: “You are correct. Anastasia-sama is presently sojourning there, rather than the Capital... and she wishes to invite you.”

Joshua quietly lowers his head.

Emilia looks away from him and glances to Subaru. Obviously, this gaze means, “what are your thoughts?”

Subaru feels similarly to Emilia about the whole thing. Everyone knows that Anastasia is staying in a mansion in the Capital's noble district while she's in Lugnica. When Mimi mentioned an invitation to a party, Subaru was certain it would be to that mansion.

Joshua: “Pristella is a scenic place. The city is distinctive in itself, and makes for a popular tourist destination. Anastasia-sama finds herself delighted and at ease there.”

Subaru: “It'd be great if you were just showing us a nice place, but... you're not, are you? Emilia and Anastasia aren't friends.”

If Subaru remembers this right, then Anastasia was particularly harsh on Emilia during the dialogues in the Palace. The candidates most unsparing toward Emilia were her and Priscilla. Crusch is simply not racist, and Felt is in Emilia's debt. So, while Anastasia did help during the White Whale and Witch Cult fights, Subaru's personal opinion of Anastasia is not very good.

So he doubts that this invitation is anything so kind-spirited.

As if supporting Subaru's doubts, a grin etches itself over Joshua's face.

And,

Joshua: “Anastasia-sama invites you out of her beneficence. She has noticed the valuable object you are searching for in Pristella.”

Emilia: “What I'm searching for?”

The instant that Emilia shows her interest, Otto's expression screams: He got her! This tells Subaru that Joshua snatched away predominance before they could stop it, but he still cannot see the crux of this deal.

In that delay, the opponent takes full control of the conversation. Grinning, Joshua speaks on:

Joshua: “—In Pristella City there is a shop selling spellstones, in which slumbers the high-grade colourless stones that you desire. I believe that you are currently seeking an anchor for the Great Spirit?”

—The second that Joshua gains dominance, the Emilia Faction are fated to leave for Pristella.

Chapter 3: Each Gives Perspective

Emilia: “It wasn't fair to Otto-kun that we decided so much on our own.”

After speaking with Joshua and returning to her room, Emilia speaks as she offers Subaru a seat. Subaru seats himself there and chuckles,

Subaru: “Leaving Otto's panic aside as a legend for future generations, I basically always support your ideas, Emilia-tan. But if I'm gonna mention something to be worried about, it'd have to be the fact that they're ready and waiting for us.”

Emilia: “I don't think Anastasia would take risks anyway, if she's sending messengers. Mimi-chan may've been there, but Joshua-kun still took control when I tried to take control.”

Subaru: “She recognizes you as an opponent if she's sending her Knight's family as her messenger. I always wondered why in Sengoku dramas, when they send important people as messengers, they don't just kill them. But turns out there's all this background stuff. Didn't think I'd be learning that by experience.”

It's a question of trust between the parties and the people.

If the people learn that the rulers acted unjustly, it harms the ruler's standing. And each faction faces too many enemies to be acting disgracefully. Otherwise, since a group faces more clandestine enemies the larger it grows, it's simple logic to be careful when challenging influential people.

—The meeting with Joshua Euclius is over, and night has fallen upon the new Roswaal Mansion.

Since it would be awful to send them back on the same day they arrived, they offered to let Joshua and Mimi stay the night, and accepted the invitation to Pristella City.

Joshua had been rather imposing when discussing the topic, but everyone saw his relief peeking through when their side accepted the invitation. His monocle was likely just a decoration to garner a certain impression from others, the earnest young lad.

Subaru: "He's way more likeable than his brother."

Emilia: "You are always so insincere about Julius. Do you still have a grudge from that time in the palace?"

Emilia catches Subaru's mutter, and amusedly pokes fun at him.

Just thinking about the affair used to make his face redden in shame, and his stomach burn with indignation. But how about now that some time has passed?

Subaru: "It's still too vivid for me to laugh and smile about it. I was young back then. And I have reflected on my actions. Wish he'd do the same."

Emilia: "But I heard you both apologized and made up. It's so uncool to give shallow apologies and keep simmering on the inside."

Subaru: "Mnngh... But I'm only human!"

Emilia looks at him reproachfully, but Subaru remains stubborn.

Subaru looks away. Emilia frowns at him for a moment, but ultimately can't

hold back her grin.

Emilia: “Fine. Subaru, you are just so stubborn. But you're not allowed to fight with Julius if we see him in Pristella. You're a knight now, and knights mustn't misuse their power.”

Subaru: “Yeah yeah you've bested me my Liege.”

Subaru covers up his blushing with some jokes and rubs at his upper lip.

He gazes absently around Emilia's room, before seeming to remember something,

Subaru: “Oh yeah, Emilia-tan. I don't really know much about Pristella, is it known for anything?”

Emilia: “Hmp, you need to study more, Subaru. Pristella is one of the five main cities of Lugnica, on the Tigracy River that marks the border with Kararagi. It's famous for being built right on a huge lake, with canals flowing through the city.”

Subaru: “Ok so leaving aside that that's all second-hand information, it's a floating city. Well you have Venice, so may as well be possible here too.”

Venice springs to mind when it comes to aquatic cities.

The town is surrounded by water on all sides, with lakes winding nonchalantly through the stone cityscape. It's one of those romantic places that everyone visits at least once, and Subaru regards it as a picturesque spot too.

And so that's the impression he gets of Pristella.

Emilia: “No, Subaru. Pristella isn't a floating city, it's a Watergate City.”

Subaru: “Watergate?”

Emilia: “Yes. It's in the middle of a lake, so the city floods when it rains. They built huge walls around the city to stop that, and there's gates to regulate the water levels. The gates are sooo amazing and famous that they don't call it the Floating City, they call it the Watergate City.”

Emilia's explanation flips Subaru's pretty water town into an enclosed watery jail. The concept is all so beautiful, and then they ruin it with these giant walls.

Subaru tilts his head, wondering why they built this whole mechanism.

Emilia: “I think there's lots of theories behind the city's construction. Like, they were testing the limits of their technology, or trying to conquer the floods without relying on magic or the Dragon, or trying to trap a powerful, evil witchbeast.”

Subaru: “None of them sound sensible but they all somehow feel possible which is how you know humans did it.”

The average person wouldn't come up with the idea, but the geniuses of humanity are fundamentally liberated from the reins of common sense. And sometimes their ideas get realised. Either way.

Subaru: “But we still don't know what they're planning. ...Doubt they're just being nice and directing us to what we're looking for.”

Emilia: “Are you sure? Have you ever considered trusting in people more, instead of being so suspicious?”

Subaru: “Sorry, but all the candidates have their faults. And I don't trust what

they're plotting for a second.”

Crusch herself is trustworthy, but Subaru doesn't know whether she'll stay a demure lady, and he has to keep wary of Felis. That problem is solved if Wilhelm reins Felis in, but the Sword Demon puts Subaru on edge too. Knowing their circumstances, it's difficult to trust them when they're left to their own devices.

Subaru has no idea what Anastasia is thinking, or what drives her.

He cannot divine her motives for sending this invitation. Julius may be the knightliest of knights, but Anastasia is ultimately in control. And the business lives of the members of Iron Fang are unrelated to who they are as people. Subaru can't dislike them.

Reinhardt and Rom from the Felt Faction may merit trust. But Felt's thoughts are unclear to Subaru. So long as she's willing to participate in the Selection, Subaru must brace for the tricky, devious girl to be scheming something.

If she seriously deploys Reinhardt, and he becomes their enemy, their chances of beating him in combat are a dream within a dream.

The Priscilla Faction is hardest to read.

Subaru cannot trust either of them. Al might also be from Japan, but he is surprisingly loyal to Priscilla. So he will not stand up for Subaru, while Priscilla's capriciousness is already terrifying. She could randomly visit to decapitate him with a smile on her face. That's her breed of absurdity.

Even though a year has passed, no candidates know the motives of the others.

Subaru needs to probe deeper if he wants to know more than what he

learned at the Palace. Which is one reason for accepting this invitation.

Subaru: “Honestly I am terrified of being in Anastasia's debt. How did she figure out you were looking for a colourless spellstone anyway?”

Emilia: “Puck showed himself in the Palace, so I didn't want anyone to know he's limited. I was trying to be sooo careful... but you just can't stop people from saying things.”

Subaru: “That's what happens. So even if we get the spellstone, it just means things are back to status quo from the other factions' perspectives. The benefits are in establishing the debt.”

That said, Puck's return will enhance Emilia's already significant combat strength. But no amount of combat power alone will secure Emilia's win in the Selection.

It would just make their defeat of the Sizeable Hare more convincing, if anything.

—The defeat of the Sizeable Hare in Sanctuary.

This second achievement of the Emilia Faction, unrelated to the defeat of Sloth of the Witch Cult, is unfortunately not recognized by the public.

There were no witnesses to the Hare's defeat, and it is impossible to retrieve any corpses as proof.

They threw the thing into another dimension never to return.

It's the truth, but not believable. The Al Shamac spell that Beatrice used is

forgotten in this era, and she lacks the mana to demonstrate the technique again.

So while they reported the Hare's defeat to the Capital, it has yet to be deemed as a legitimate

achievement. And if they go into detail, they will have to describe Sanctuary in detail too, and thus reveal that Roswaal kept a hidden village in his territory. Ultimately they had to stop pressing the issue.

They were told that their claims would gain credibility if the Hare remains unseen for the next decade, but by that point it's too late to be a useful achievement.

Though it doesn't bother Emilia too much, since it all happened extremely suddenly.

Subaru: "But it's still annoying. Seriously how much pain did those fucking rabbits put me through..."

Emilia: "But we really did beat the Sizeable Hare, even if they don't believe us. That scary witchbeast won't hurt anyone else any more. Isn't that enough?"

Subaru: "Emilia-tan you are way too positive and kind..."

When you do something righteous, it ought to be acknowledged.

Emilia speaks magnanimously, making Subaru recognize how pathetic he is. How nice would it be if he could think the way Emilia does? He will never achieve it.

It just irritates him not to get recognition he deserves.

Emilia sees Subaru sulking, and her mouth relaxes into a smile.

Subaru hasn't noticed that Emilia sometimes gazes at him with this tender look in her eye. Or that her expression during these moments lacks the maternal spark of a mother watching over a child, and is instead something indescribably complex.

Emilia: "And people already know that you've achieved things, Subaru. It's formally recognized that you fought the White Whale and defeated Sloth."

Subaru: "For those... it really feels like I only got the scraps. People were doing a lot more than me for the White Whale, and I just happened to snag the perfect moment at the end. And I didn't have that goal in mind for Sloth."

All he was thinking during the Betelgeux fight was to protect Emilia.

Or, no, that's not quite accurate. What Subaru felt back then was both desire to protect Emilia, and hatred for Betelgeux personally.

It's not a question of which is legitimate. Both are, and both desires are Subaru's own.

It makes him uncomfortable that a fight which was basically a personal grudge is deemed as being for the sake of the world at large.

Emilia: "But that's the same for the Sizeable Hare. You defeated two of the witchbeasts that had been tormenting the world for four hundred years in such a short timespan... I know I'm not one to say this, but it's like you're doing sooo much more than you should."

Subaru: "Yeah. And there I am involved in both. Honestly, I think what I've done's excessive. Let's just hope the last one doesn't show up."

Emilia: “—Yes.”

Subaru trusts in the power of words and prays to never encounter the Blacksnake. But Emilia's response is rather wooden.

It's almost as if she has some personal thoughts on the Blacksnake.

Emilia: “So anyway, about Pristella.”

But before he can address the shift in her attitude, she changes the topic.

Obviously she doesn't want to talk about it. And, having grown somewhat wiser, Subaru decides not to force an explanation out of her.

Though sometimes he forgets to pay attention to things like that and acts exactly how he used to.

Emilia: “We know we're going, but do we really want to go with the same people? I kind of wanted to talk with Roswaal about it, too.”

Subaru: “I think we're fine. You're going, so naturally your Knight, that is me, and my partner Beako will be coming too. But being serious, we bring Garf for combat and Otto too since he's so insistent to go. I'd really like for Petra or Frederica to come too so all your needs are addressed, but...”

Emilia: “It's too bad. Roswaal's busy with the Meeting of the Western Lords. We've known forever that Petra needs to join him for her maid training. Though she's sooo angry about it.”

Subaru: “Because she completely hates Roswaal after the Sanctuary thing. Roswaal enjoys it, which keeps Ram quiet, but

Petra is maturing justly and brilliantly as a maid, but her core is still dangerously childish.

Her harshness on her master Roswaal is particularly striking, and she conceivably would wring the water from her washcloth into his tea. But since Subaru is on Petra's side, he's ready to overlook it even should he hypothetically witness it.

Only time will mend broken trust. But it seems that a year was not enough for Petra to start listening to Roswaal.

Subaru: "Which means Frederica should go with them as a restraint and a model of proper etiquette, which leaves Ram in the mansion. Hold on this is dicey."

Emilia: "Really? Anne will be going to the meeting too, so Clind-san will be there. I'm sure he'll be friendly with Petra, so maybe Frederica doesn't need to go."

Subaru: "Clind-san... I don't really get him."

Subaru thinks back on the powerful butler of the Milord Mansion, where the group stayed while their mansion was being prepared.

He works with such incredible refinement that the eye can't catch it. It's a mess of a compliment, but it's what describes him.

Subaru's training in parkour also began with Clind, who taught him the basics. He coached Subaru, who cannot exceed the physical limits of the ordinary man, when he was trying to figure out how to move without disregarding his

boundaries.

Anne-Rose and Clind have visited the new mansion multiple times to hang out. Subaru had Clind watch him practice his parkour, but then Clind defeated Garfiel's obstacle course without breaking a sweat and without ruffling his clothes. He's inhuman.

Subaru: "But leaving aside who's staying in the mansion, we shouldn't worry about it. And anyway I should be the one more concerned about being careful. Goes for you too, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Mm. I do feel bad about agreeing without discussing it. I'll have to apologize to Otto-kun."

Subaru: "He doesn't care about his dignity, but he does hold onto things for ages. I'll tell him that I told you off so hard you cried."

Emilia: "Heehee, thank you."

Subaru fires an uppercut into the air, and Emilia smiles. She puts her hand to her chest and touches the blue crystal pendant hanging there.

Even now, the Great Spirit Puck sleeps in that crystal.

Nevermind his true power, this gem isn't even strong enough for him to communicate. If he even twitches, the jewel will break and he will be unleashed—or so Emilia and Beatrice say.

Once he is free, Puck will inadvertently bring great destruction on the environment, eventually run out of mana, and disappear back to where he came.

Emilia is constantly supplying the crystal with mana so that this doesn't

happen, and preserving Puck. Now they just need to make a good crystal from colourless spellstone and they should be able to restore him.

Anastasia is saying she has seen spellstones that can withstand this wear.

Emilia: “Once I can talk with Puck again... there are so many things I want to ask him. So—” Emilia closes her eyes, saying nothing more.

Her long eyelashes quiver, and Subaru quietly scratches his head. He can only vaguely figure what Emilia is thinking.

Subaru: “You better get back here, cat spirit. I got a mountain of complaints for you.” And, as her knight should, he agrees with her alongside his insults.

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Otto: “You know! I'm saying this with everyone's best interests in mind!” Otto Swein slams his glass to the table, clearly in a bad mood.

After his conversation with Emilia and dinner, Subaru decided to see Otto before his nightly routine, and has been listening to him drunkenly complain for the past while.

Garfiel: “'S been like this th'whole time. My amazin' ears're sick'a it.”

Says Garfiel in exasperation, sitting beside Subaru as he listens to Otto complain. He sticks his pinky in his ear and scratches his head, his sharp fangs clicking as he laps at his glass of milk.

Subaru is insisting that they not give alcohol to minors like him. Frederica and Ram agree, and he is trying to establish twenty as the drinking age in Roswaal Mansion. Also one time naughty Otto encouraged Garfiel to take a sip of alcohol and it turns out he can't hold his liquor at all.

Now just seeing a bottle of the stuff is enough to make him grimace.

Subaru isn't going to break the laws from the old world, so the only drinkers

in the mansion are Roswaal, Otto, Ram, and Frederica.

Which means that the only drinker in the room is Otto.

Subaru: “Don't sulk. Emilia's sorry about deciding everything on her own. She knows she should've discussed it. Don't think it would've changed anything though.”

Otto: “But there is more to things than their outcome. The process is important. You often get conversations where the conclusion is apparent from the very beginning, but the course you follow to get there is essential. Especially when we're unguardedly accepting their offer... you mustn't play into the opponent's hands!”

Subaru attempts to smooth things over, but Otto snaps at him. He's completely correct so Subaru can't rebut him, but,

Subaru: “What the hell, you sound like an actual internal affairs guy. After how hard you resisted it in the beginning? Guess you weren't so reluctant about it after all.”

Garfiel: “We're juss acceptin' a damn invitation, it ain't that complicated, Otto.” Otto: “It's almost invigorating how little you two have changed!”

Subaru and Garfiel dig into Otto in concert and high-five. The three friends are around the same age, and often hang out together. It is beautiful how naturally their conversations fall into this exact pattern.

Who cares about what Otto thinks. He makes a wonderful internal affairs minister.

He was well-educated as a merchant's son, learned the ways of the world as a

travelling merchant, and he's both smart and calculating. This has to be a better fate for him than somehow getting swindled into slavery.

Though, he still tilts his head, wondering how this even happened to him as he chips through mountains of paperwork. Guy's stubborn.

Since he's seen Roswaal's confidential paperwork, is accustomed to his post as Emilia's helper, and is neck-deep in managing the territory of Margrave Mathers, he has no hope of escape.

Otto: "What is that, that pitying look. It's like you're gazing at a chicken seconds before strangling it."

Subaru: "It's more like I'm gazing at a battery hen that only gets to live for its eggs." Otto: "Even worse!"

Garfiel: "Yer be quiet now. 'N stop teasin' him so much, Captain. Rules're t'keep it t'ten Ottos a day." Otto: "How much is that!? How much is ten Ottos a day!?"

Yells Otto, his face red, but neither Subaru or Garfiel respond.

This is what it's like when he's drunk. He's working a stressful job, so they give him his drinking time, but it might actually just encourage even more stress.

Subaru: "Otto vents best by yelling anyway."

Otto: "Clearly not!"

Garfiel: "Yeah yeah now quiet down 'n pour yerself another drink. Anyway, Captain, got somethin' I wanna check with ya."

Subaru: "Oh? Don't get that often. Go ahead."

Otto grumbles as he refills his glass and quietly sips at it. Garfiel glances away from him, his mouth white with milk.

Garfiel: "'S 'bout what the enemy's doin', obviously. The candidates ain't never got any scuffles goin' before, 'n now she's up in our face lookin' fer a fight. She gotta be up t'somethin', yeh?"

Subaru: "You mean, you think she just challenged us to a duel?"

Garfiel: "'Course I goddamn do. 'S what she's thinkin'. Forget that weedy Joshua prick, you see the cat kid who was with 'im?"

—The cat kid is the same age as you.

The comment is too tasteless for Subaru to actually say it. But what's his problem with Mimi? Far as Subaru could tell she was acting the same as usual, just reaching for her tea and biscuits.

And she did the same thing through dinner too.

Garfiel: "That girl's damn tough. N' she was starin' at my 'mazin' self, not juss durin' the talk, but all through fuckin' dinner. She musta figured out 'm th'strongest guy in the place."

Subaru: "Are you sure...? No, I mean, Mimi is strong, and she is kind of a battle junkie, but..."

She doesn't seem marginally smart enough to have ulterior motives. Subaru can only see her as transparent, or actually just airheaded.

Garfiel: “Either way, sh's keepin' n' eye on my amazin' self while she's here. Best we make sure you and Emilia-sama ain't caught on yer own while we're over there, Captain. Otto's one thing, but we ain't ever recoverin' if we lose you.”

Otto: “You do realise that this fief will be an absolute mess if I'm gone!? I wish that you would take that into consideration sometimes!”

Garfiel isn't trying to belittle Otto as he urges caution.

It's just that he needs to make the comparison if he's going to get his point across to Subaru. Though he doesn't pass up the opportunity to play with Otto.

Subaru: “Yeah, I'm definitely relying on you for that. Don't want to draw it out so this'll be short but, I'm counting on you, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Yeah, make sure ya do. Count on The Strongest of Shields, aka The Legendary Guardian, Garfiel Tinsel!”

Garfiel proudly points at himself with his thumb. Subaru nods at him.

He takes a sip from his own glass of milk, regretting how awesome Garfiel's titles are.

He'll probably get even more titles once his might and valour resound all through the Kingdom.

Will Subaru's imagination be strong enough to provide for Garfiel then?

Subaru: “I wonder if I'll ever have a stroke of genius like Invisible Providence again... only Fortune herself knows when she'll smile upon me.”

Garfiel: “Yer mullin' over somethin' again. You ain't gotta trouble yerself. Y'get things done when it matters. I got faith in that.”

Emilia's the same, but the trust in Garfiel's gaze is incredibly convincing. It instantly makes Subaru feel that he must match up to it.

He's trying not to mistake the self-improvement needed to meet that trust with blind, headless sprinting.

Subaru: “If we've got Garfiel then we don't have to worry about our combat strength. Emilia-tan's a pretty strong fighter on her own too, and I'm decent enough with Beako. The problem here's Otto... are you seriously coming with us?”

Otto: “Of course I am! I don't want to know what insane arrangement you and Emilia-sama will land yourselves in if I don't go!”

It's also electrifying how little they trust Subaru when it comes to negotiations.

Emilia is as honest and pure as she appears, and while Subaru is devious he's also inexperienced. So naturally they look like sitting ducks to Otto.

Otto: “Also, Pristella is the birthplace of Hoshin of the Wastes, the founder of Kararagi. It has contact with Kararagi since it's on the border, making it a highly significant place for merchants. I find myself duty-stricken to visit it too.”

Subaru: “I thought you washed your hands of being a merchant ages ago. The hell are you doing.”

Otto: “You are mistaken if you think that I will resign myself to being an Internal Affairs Minister forever! My ultimate goal is still to be a successful merchant with his own shop! This is a necessary road to get there, a necessary road on the path to my goal!”

Garfiel: “Possible that th'road leads ter yer death.”

That stuff about trapping him here is honestly pretty shallow, and if he yearns to go and can help them as Internal Affairs Minister, it makes sense that Otto should join them.

Everyone in the mansion knows, for all their banter, that they can't function without Otto. And Otto knows it, too, which is why he can't leave.

Subaru: “Or you could just be a masochist but we'll disregard that.”

Otto: “Did you just agree at me in an incredibly impolite way or am I only imagining it!?”

Subaru: “It's not important. Anastasia's going to be there, and we don't know what terms she'll hit us with. We're counting on you. You're on bureaucracy, Garfiel's on military. And I'm there to make things fun.”

Otto: “Do more!”

Subaru could try his absolute best, but he will never be stronger than Garfiel. He could study his

absolute best, but he wouldn't have time to eclipse Otto as a bureaucrat.

Subaru: “Just gotta do what I can do. One of those positive steps to self-improvement that I've mulled over with Beako.”

Garfiel: “Yer gonna be fine if Emilia-sama 'n Beatrice're with ya. Meanin' my amazin' self gotta cover for Otto. Watch yer back for me, yeh?”

Otto: “Why does it feel like I'm the greatest burden here... I can't say that I agree with it.”

Subaru gets serious, and Garfiel accepts his post of babysitter. Otto grumbles and takes another sip of his liquor.

The night grows darker, the mood pleasant.

Subaru: “Now, we're gonna be busy tomorrow, so I'm calling it about here. What about you, Garfiel?”

Garfiel: “I'll stay'n drink some more with Otto. Gettin' pretty close t'beatin' him at Shatranj. Might pull it off now that he's drunk.”

Garfiel disregards Subaru and grabs a game board and pieces from the back of the room. The game is called Shatranj, with rules similar to Shogi or Chess. Subaru finds himself impressed that every world has these games.

Otto is apparently quite good at them, and though Garfiel has been trying his hardest, he has suffered losses upon losses. Also Subaru is outrageously good at Othello, but struggles at Shogi and Chess.

Subaru: “Don't stay up too late. It'll stunt your growth.”

Garfiel: “Yer said that before n' so that's what I been doin' but yer sure this fuckin' works? Don't feel I grew at all this year.”

Subaru: “Frederica absorbed some of the growth so your case is complicated.” Garfiel: “Fuck you Sis!”

Roars Garfiel, baring his fangs as he slams the Shatranj board on the table. Then he hunches over and starts meticulously arranging the tiny pieces.

While watching Garfiel go at it, Subaru waves to a red-faced Otto.

Subaru: “Don't you get too drunk either. If you wind up hungover and useless, Petra will think even less of you.”

Otto: “I feel like she's been rather harsh with me lately, but perhaps it's just me. Could you have a word with her?”

Subaru: “You mean tell her to try harder?”

Otto: “I was clearly asking you to tell her to be nicer to me!”

Subaru answers with a bitter smile, telling Otto that it's impossible, and leaves the two to play Shatranj as he exits the room.

The crystalights in the hallway tell Subaru that it's almost past midnight. Usually he would be in bed by this hour, but,

Subaru: “Wound up running late today.”

With that excuse, Subaru ignores the staircase to his room on the third floor of the eastern wing, and heads for the women's bedrooms in the western wing.

Where,

Subaru: “—Mind if I come in?” Subaru always knocks on the door.

He knows that no one will reply. So does he say it because he has hope? Or perhaps he confirms that there is no reply, so that he doesn't forget.

—So that he doesn't forget the inferno, always blazing in his chest? Subaru:
“—”

Subaru opens the door. A pitch dark room welcomes him.

It's a simple room. Its layout is identical to the countless other guest rooms in the mansion, but it plainly lacks in furniture. Just a bed in the middle of the room, windows, their curtains, a small table, and a vase with flowers.

Subaru knows that no one will complain, but he still dislikes the austerity.

Call it sentimental, but he wishes that the place had some human warmth. Perhaps the day will never come where he manages to disregard that wish as weakness.

Emilia: <If you could rationalize things that way, I don't think we ever would've found common ground to our arguments. I like you sooo much just the way you are.>

Beatrice: <It is a vice to want beyond your means, in fact. Subaru, you are reckless on your own, I suppose. ...But you're not alone any more, so I'll manage something for you even if you're being greedy, in fact.>

Subaru: “They're coddling me. And Emilia-tan is tantalizing me with those provocative statements.” Subaru wishes she would be more careful about saying 'I like you' or 'you're so cool'.

He has told her how he feels, but Emilia is too immature for it. Their relationship still has yet to go anywhere romantic.

But even supposing it did suddenly go somewhere romantic, Subaru is not mentally ready for it either. Give him two more years, no three—or even more if it's possible. That's the kind of loser he is.

Subaru: “God it's so rude of me to go on about Emilia or Beatrice while I'm here. Petra'd beat me up if she heard this.”

Petra might have the best grasp of romance and its subtleties out of anyone in the mansion. Somehow everyone is terrible at relationships. Roswaal leads the charge with his toxic obsession, with the others all having their foibles too.

Garfiel's feelings for Ram are still a middle school crush, though Subaru has no place to talk. Ram's ideas about extreme loyalty dictating love are perplexing, and Frederica's love life is a complete

unknown. Otto sometimes mentions while drunk things about being raked through the mud for philandering, but the consensus is that these claims are lies and pretence.

It's a disgrace to these adults that a thirteen year old girl is beating them.

Subaru: “So how does that stand. I don't think that tendency will change much, even after you wake up. Either because I'm a loser, or because you respect me.”

Subaru pulls a chair over and seats himself beside the bed.

Moonlight slips in through the crack in the curtains, illuminating her face as she sleeps.

The light of the moon spills over her pale face, pink lips. She is a sleeping beauty with short blue hair, her curvy body garbed in thin negligee, her chest rising and falling in time with her breathing.

—She has slept for over a year now.

Subaru: “Got lots of things to tell you today. Since some guests showed up uninvited, and with this crazy offer. I started my day with my usual—”

Subaru speaks calmly to her as she sleeps.

He uses his same comedic phrasing as always, but his tone is incredibly gentle. He speaks as though lulling a child to sleep as he cheerily tells her about his day.

She doesn't respond. Even so. These trysts unfold every night.

Tonight is rife with things to discuss. Until the moon sits low in the sky, the tale goes on between Subaru and the Sleeping Beauty.

Chapter 4: On The Road

It takes them three days before they set out for Pristella.

Roswaal: “I respect Emilia-sama's decision, aaaaaaand there's nothing urgent for her to do here, sooooo I'm amenable to it. Though it iiiiiiiis worrying that their intentions are uuuuuuunreadable.”

The Meeting of the Western Lords—a conference between Margrave Roswaal and the other lords under that banner—will be taking place in the mansion of the most neutral lord among them.

The lords are generally compliant to Roswaal's beat, but some definitely do voice objection and unease about his support for Emilia.

Most of the lords are copacetic to Roswaal's policy of demihuman favouritism, or really, equality for demihumans, but half-elves are not commonly regarded as demihuman.

Over the past year, they have succeeded in getting some lords to superficially support her through discussions and deals. This conference is, in part, to establish a podium for her to speak with the lords who still stubbornly refuse her.

Roswaal is leaving the mansion empty to set up that groundwork. Emilia: “I'm sorry. I honestly wanted to attend the meeting too, but...”

Roswaal: “liiiiiit would backfire. The purpose of this meeting is so that you may speak with them later, meaning that it would be foul play to reveal you at this stage. ...Hoooooowever, if you could calm the confusion and silence the rebelling lords with some masterful piece of oration, that woooooould be nice.”

Emilia: "...I don't think I can manage that yet. Okay. I'll behave."

Emilia purses her lips and casts her gaze down in frustration. Roswaal nods at her, satisfied. Subaru does want to object to Roswaal's somewhat sarcastic tone, but at least it means the guy is speaking with her more sincerely.

It's infinitely better than last year, when Roswaal blatantly kept Emilia the Accessory away from the political issues—or so Emilia divulged to Subaru after he complained about it.

Roswaal makes a far more dependable supporter now that he's being proactive. But since his motives are questionable, it's only half as beneficial as it initially seems.

Subaru: "Assuming that Petra's definitely going to the meeting... who's left in the mansion?"

Roswaal: "Anne-Rose and her associates wiiiiiiill be attending. I doubt there will be any issues if Clind-kun is present, coooooonsidering his favouritism for Petra. I was intending to leave Frederica here, since she gets along poorly with him... what about you, Ram?"

Ram: "I shall accompany you as you desire, Roswaal-sama."

Subaru: "You say 'as you desire' but it's totally your desires talking..."

Ram is still an advocate for Roswaal, but is less hesitant to insist upon her own desires now. Roswaal seems to be accepting it without thinking it strange. Their relationship of one-sided dependency looks to have changed.

The dependant atmosphere around them is gone, and it feels like they

actually understand each other now. Though it's unclear whether it's beneficial to have someone around who empathises with Roswaal.

Ram: "What are you staring at. Say anything thoughtless and I'll mash your eyes to paste, Barusu." Subaru: "Sister, in your mind, just how incessant am I exactly?"

Ram: "..."

Ram makes an extremely complicated expression.

It's not because it's a tricky question. It's just the expression she makes whenever Subaru calls her 'Sister'.

She doesn't dislike it, but it doesn't feel legitimate. Since she has yet to recover her memories of Rem, those years of being worshipped by her little sister are still lost to the void.

Roswaal: "It would worry me were it only Emilia-sama and yourself leaving, buuuuuuut I'm sure that you'll be fine with Garfiel and Otto-kun accompanying you. Otto-kun will keep you from stumbling into any horrendously awful agreements, and Garfiel resolves the worst of problems by pulverising them while you flee."

Emilia: "But I think that'd cause sooo many problems too... I'll do my best to keep it from coming to that."

Subaru: "Leave pressuring them to me, Emilia-tan. I'll be right on them whether it's Anastasia-san or Julius. There's this chatty witch I know who's taught me all about people dodging important topics in conversation."

Emilia: "I'm not sure if that's something to brag about..."

Subaru shoots Emilia a thumbs up and grins, teeth sparkling. Naturally, Emilia knows that Subaru is joking around to relax her.

They have build enough trust over the last year for that much understanding, at least. Roswaal: “Nooooooooooooow, Beatrice. I can trust that yooooooooou'll look after them?”

Beatrice: “Of course, in fact. You can't rest easy about any of these people were Betty not with them, I suppose.”

Beatrice's pigtails bob as she puffs out her chest.

Her adorable attitude puts a smile on everyone's face. Though she herself just looks displeased.

—Regardless, with this conversation over, they determine to leave for Pristella.

Joshua: “Ask for the Seasyolph Lodge once you arrive. That is where Anastasia-sama awaits you.” Mimi: “Don't keep her waiting!”

On that note, Anastasia's subordinates leave the Roswaal Manor.

They leave for Pristella first to tell Anastasia that the invitation has been accepted. Garfiel: “Yeh, take care.”

Mimi: “You take care too, Garf! I'm gonna be super on edge waiting, so you better come!”

Garfiel: “Hell about you's on edge. But I get ya. These guys ain't got a hope without my amazin' self. We'll settle this there. Get yer neck ready fer th'rope.”

Mimi: “Huh? Okay! I'll get it super ready!”

This cute little exchange between Mimi and Garfiel was particularly notable. Garfiel had been so wary of the two during their stay, but going by Mimi's attitude, feels like his fears were misplaced. Or rather, feels like Mimi is extremely affectionate when making friends. She started calling him 'Garf' out of nowhere, so perhaps Anastasia's invitation really isn't hostile.

Joshua: “You may have won Mimi over, but I... I myself shall not yield so easily.” Says Joshua, trying to stay stoic while following his cheerful bodyguard.

Mimi keeps a tight grip on his arm, yanking him down and forward as she bounds ahead. His expression is dead serious during all of this, which is kind of comical.

But even Subaru has fostered enough kindness over this year to not inform him of the fact.

Emilia: “Joshua-kun, will you be okay? You have such a lovely outfit, but the sleeve's seconds from coming off...”

Joshua: “P-Please don't worry. There's no need for concern!”

While Subaru can understand the poor boy's feelings, the attending angel cannot. Emilia speaks with sincere concern for Joshua, who musn't raise his voice and instead tries to pry Mimi off, looking miserable. But Mimi is expectedly stronger than Joshua and his efforts come to nothing.

Joshua: “My brother may call you his friend, but I believe he is being far too kind. Which is one of his virtues. I believe it my job as his younger brother to compensate for that, so you best not expect any mercy from the Euclius

family.”

Subaru: “What, you already stopped with the 'I myself' thing?”

Joshua: “P-Please pay attention to what I'm saying! Trying to make a fool of me! Not a very pleasant man, are you!”

Subaru: “I'm more worried about you and how you're forgetting your place as your master's servant. If you deride people in public, it'd probably wind up as a black mark on the Euclius family.”

Joshua: “—!”

Joshua's face pales, but Subaru isn't trying just to criticise him. And Subaru's at far higher risk for insulting people in public anyway.

Not that Joshua would know that, and Natsuki Subaru being Natsuki Subaru has reason not to tell him.

Emilia: “Subaru, stop bullying younger kids. I'm so sorry, Joshua-kun. Subaru's... he can be like that.”

Joshua: “— . N-no... I was truly being impolite. I apologize.”

Subaru: “Just 'I'? Ow! Ow, that hurts, Emilia-tan!”

Subaru immediately starts criticising Joshua again, when Emilia grabs his ear and yanks it. Joshua sees tears rise in Subaru's eyes, and, satisfied, decides to leave the conversation there.

With a deep breath, Joshua files into his dragon carriage. But since ligers are pulling the vehicle rather than dragons it's really a dog carriage, which he files into.

Perhaps dog races are a thing here?

Subaru: "Might be worth it to introduce some forms of entertainment, like horse racing and stuff..."

Subaru's ideas that use his Unique Knowledge From The 21st Century never graduate from his imagination. But maybe he should more seriously consider utilizing his knowledge.

First he needs to judge what the pros and cons of popularizing horse racing would be, and, Emilia: "What's up, Subaru. You look like you're thinking of something sooo devious."

Subaru: "Got a rare flood of ideas from my Unique Knowledge From The 21st Century. Like a burst of Subaruisms."

Emilia: "Oh, you thought of another new topping? I liked the mayonnaise, and I liked the tartar sauce too."

Subaru: "This time I'm thinking unique in a way that the populace would never conceive."

Incidentally the Roswaal Mansion carries a stockpile of tartar sauce, just like it does mayonnaise. Basically everyone here likes it, but it doesn't entirely satisfy Subaru.

While all this chitchat is going on, Joshua and Mimi get ready to leave and their carriage begins to move.

They aren't sitting on the coachman's seat to drive, Mimi just mounts one of

the two ligers and controls their course directly. Her white robe flutters as she smiles cheerfully.

Mimi: “Okay! See you two and Garf later!”

They pleasantly see Mimi off, and wave goodbye to a wary Joshua through the window too. Two days after seeing them off, Subaru and the others leave for Pristella.

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Otto: “It will take us over ten days to get there, even if we hurry. We have no real need to hurry, either, so let's relax and take our time.”

Nobody has any objection to Otto's plan.

He is the one most accustomed to travelling among them, and he probably holds the median value in their group for physical resilience. If they travel at a pace that puts no strain on him, then everyone should enjoy a safe journey.

Otto: “Considering the carriage's load, we will have Frufoo and Patraschechan pull the carriage. And since we plan not to camp anywhere, we should be fine with only the bare minimum of emergency supplies.”

Garfiel: “'S no good fer th'body t'just sit there in a carriage th'whole time, Otto.” Otto: “If that's what you think, you're always free to leave the carriage and run.” Garfiel: “Yup, that's what'll do.”

Emilia: "That's what you'll do?"

With this little scene where Garfiel and Otto's usual banter shocks Emilia, the journey to Pristella begins.

But, having said that, the journey itself proceeds without issue.

They have some trouble when they cross borders into non-Mathers territory, or when passing through other lords' gates, but the issue is more or less resolved by flashing the Mathers family crest or showing Emilia's presence.

This itself is liable to stir up trouble too, but they come across no one plotting anything nefarious because of this journey.

When wild dogs or witchbeasts appear on the road, foolishly trying to attack the carriage, Garfiel: "Perfect. Been wantin' t'smack some critters around."

Garfiel violently tears through the group, scaring away the instigating animals. His perfect work as a bodyguard actually makes the poor witchbeasts sympathetic.

But even terrifying Garfiel has to kill downtime by chewing on a knife he brought, giving him a trace of gap moe.

Also it's always unnerving to see him chew the hard steel to bits.

Beatrice: "Mm. This dragon isn't bad, in fact. I'll concede that much, I suppose." Says Beatrice, seated next to Subaru, who holds the reigns.

Perhaps it's a surprise, but Otto isn't the only one tasked with driving. It took a year of trying, and a dragon that knows Subaru's idiosyncrasies, but he can drive a carriage now.

Is one thing you could say, but this is Patrasche and Otto's dragon Frufoo. Though, the only other dragons that the Roswaal Mansion keeps are Rascal and Peter. Of course Subaru's familiar enough with them to name them.

Subaru: “How about less condescension, and more helping me with the reigns? Patrasche is abounding in maternal spirit, I'm sure she'll be nice to you too, Beako.”

Beatrice: “I'd rather not, in fact. Actually, that dragon is quite plainly glaring at me, I suppose. She doesn't consider me a friend, in fact. What are these horrendous lies about maternal spirit, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Hey, there'll be no badmouthing Patrasche. I'll never let anyone insult Emilia-tan, Rem, you, or Patrasche.”

Beatrice: “You include me in your list, but still won't let me, I suppose?”
Subaru: “When it's someone on the list, they're being naughty!”

Beatrice tries to escape, but it's impossible on the narrow driver's platform. Subaru grabs her by the scruff of the neck and draws her near, setting her on his lap as she struggles. He attempts to sentence her to tickle torture, when a strand of her hair brushes across his nose, making him sneeze dramatically—and the carriage swerves.

Otto: “Natsuki-san! Don't let them do anything odd! If they exit the Windbreaker Blessing, we're all going to have a terrible time with the motion sickness!”

Subaru: “Sorry! Beako was being so much fun that I just...”

Beatrice: “Don't you try to make this Betty's fault, in fact! Subaru just went and... stop tickling me, I suppose! Sto—pffweheehee!”

Otto sighs at the two as they play. Emilia giggles,

Emilia: “They really get along so well. Not too long ago, I never would've imagined that Subaru and Beatrice would be so close.”

Otto: “Personally, I can't believe that they were ever apart. It's almost sickly how sweet Beatrice-chan is and how doting Natsuki-san is.”

Emilia smiles solemnly, looking something like a mother or older sister to Otto's eyes. But Otto isn't tasteless enough to point it out, or to encourage Subaru's antics.

Otto: “We'll leave them to their merriment while we discuss something more important. That is, we will discuss the goals of Anastasia's faction, and how we will respond to them.”

Emilia: “They're not trying to just put us in their debt.”

Otto: “The first of the three years in the selection has passed, making this the final opportunity to establish definite groundwork. Once we establish our footing here, we will secure our support base at the Meeting of the Western Lords. If you ignore that the other factions had that issue resolved from the beginning, we should be about equal to them in our progress.”

Emilia: “Where is Anastasia sitting right now?”

Emilia has been estranged from the exact movements of the other factions for a while.

Because they needed to train Emilia from scratch on how to be a politician, and let her acquire the skills she needs, rather than panic her with unneeded

information.

Roswaal and Otto, the internal affairs duo, understood that as her reasoning for focusing her attention elsewhere, and also understand that it ought to be safe to remove some of those restrictions on this journey.

So Otto nods to Emilia and begins mentally organizing the facts.

Otto: “First we will discuss the support for the candidates as of the present. Initially, Duchess Crusch Karsten and Anastasia Hoshin were generally understood as the sure winner and the competition. The other three factions, including yours... if you'd allow me to be blunt, they're somewhat seen as space-fillers.”

Emilia: “...Mm, I can't deny that. But from what you're saying...”

Otto: “Exactly. Common opinion has changed over this last year. Because the other three factions, starting with yours, have made notable achievements.”

The most conspicuous achievements from the Emilia Faction, predictably, are the defeat of Sloth and the White Whale. Crusch's Faction was the one leading the offensive against the Whale, but Crusch herself has publicly stated the greatness of Sir Natsuki Subaru's contribution to the effort. Though the other factions were helping, Subaru headed the Sloth offensive. Both achievements instantly drew public attention to the previously-disregarded Emilia.

Emilia also stands out negatively due to her heritage. For better or for worse, Emilia is widely acknowledged as the topic of much gossip and rumour.

The other unknown candidates, Felt and Priscilla, have also been given similar benefits.

Priscilla Barielle has done remarkable work. After inheriting land from her deceased husband, Rype Barielle, she used Lugnica's unfortunate position as a nation bordering the long-hostile Volakian Empire to her advantage, and instantly made allies of the neighbouring territories in the confusion. Almost like magic, she pacified Volakia and made allies of the lords. Then she revitalized lands that had been ruined by war. In this short timeframe, she has definitely shown good prospects.

She also has her overwhelming attitude and her looks going for her. Southern Lugnica grows more and more supportive of her by the day.

Meanwhile, Felt has Reinhardt Van Astrea and the territories of the Astrea family: relative to the other candidates, she is stuck in the shadow of her knight.

The title of 'Sword Saint', as overwhelmingly famous as it is, is not especially useful when choosing a new Ruler. The attitudes of the local lords, including those in the Astrea domain, veer closer to distrust than caution.

But Felt overcame this poor situation quite unexpectedly.

Rather than consult the powerful nobles who could stymie the other candidates, she assembled those who had resigned from office and commoners on the streets.

Felt is stupidly good at picking out those with hidden aspirations, or talented people who were never given a chance. Nevermind the rumours about her having royal blood, she can identify people's talents and assign them to a post, which is perhaps the most important quality in a leader. From that small trigger, the Astrea household and its surrounding territories burst into activity, while the onlooking lords began to slowly change their tune.

It's still just a small spark, but she is definitely carving herself a place in history. Nobody important in this nation is ignoring her.

Otto: "...is where each faction is now. Our faction is quite notable for its

achievements, but the other two parties have a more stable foundation. Though, I believe that we could disregard that if the Sizeable Hare offensive were officially acknowledged.”

Emilia: “Otto-kun, you're saying the same things as Subaru. But maybe this means it's safe to take a narcissistic view, and say that we're about in the middle.”

Otto: “For now. Yes. But... there have been some changes on Duchess Karsten's front. Ones that are to our benefit.”

Emilia: “To our benefit?”

Otto: “Yes. Duchess Crusch Karsten, as if she's a different person, has lost some of her lustre over this year. She used to be stern in both public and private affairs, someone that the supporters of the previous Duke Karsten couldn't help but accept.”

Something has changed in her politics and policies.

She has become less decisive, and plainly gives a soft impression. Rumours have spread that she attempted her best to serve the unwomanly role of Duchess, but finally her true colours have come through.

She's apparently busy dealing with unsatisfied subjects and lords, even calling upon the previous, retired Duke's assistance.

Otto: “People were certain that she'd win the Selection, being that she secured the first achievement with the White Whale offensive... but, it's unclear what exactly led to her downfall. Emilia-sama, be sure to keep vigilant.”

Emilia: “—I see.”

Emilia lowers her eyes, full of gloom.

She can't help but feel sympathetic for her rivals, but Otto finds that stance dangerous and fragile. They're eventually going to oppose each other. It's disadvantageous to be unduly supportive.

This last year has taught Otto that the truism applies in both commerce and politics.

Otto: “Try not to brood on it. More conversations like this will have to happen in the future.” Emilia: “Mm. Thank you. I know you're just looking out for me.”

Otto: “Excellent. Now, let's finally get onto the topic of Anastasia's faction. They have nowhere to call their base in Lugnica, but have the backing of important merchants in Kararagi. Stores that had originally been considering the idea are now springing up across Lugnica, all with Hoshin Enterprises’s backing.”

Emilia: “But what does that mean? Maybe there are lots of new stores, but that doesn't mean lots of new suppor... oh, there's more people who know her, so she's more visible?”

Otto: “That would be a side-effect, I think. Her goal is more simple than that. —She can use far much more money. And since money is so simple, it works on anyone. There is no creature of society out there who lives in peace after economic downfall.”

Making allies of merchants means making more friends in the world of business. And being that economics supports society, holding economic power means she can attack and defend that society. She's making allies all over the place, making it nigh impossible to counter her, a businesswoman who

prioritises her economic strength.

Otto: “I believe that Anastasia's faction is the one we must be most cautious of. And then we get an invitation from them... and it all feels like we're going to wind up in their debt. Do you understand how immeasurably troubled I am?”

Emilia: “...It's finally sunken in sooo deep. I'm sorry for acting so rashly.”

Otto: “Nothing to worry, just as long as you understand. You'll never do anything careless again I'm sure... I'm sure... because I'm sure that you understand!”

Emilia bows her head, and Otto shakes his in submission, then sighs.

Otto's clear explanation of matters makes it very easy to understand. Emilia nods over and over.

Indeed. The world of politics is complex and tricky.

She already knew that her thoughts of 'I'll do my best' and 'Let's do our best' wouldn't secure her the victory, but it dizzies her to think that she has to pay mind to what the others are doing.

She's glad that he's revealed these secrets to her, but it also makes her far more uneasy. Otto: “You don't have to agonize over it alone.”

Says Otto, imagining how Emilia must feel. Emilia looks up. Otto fiddles with his grey hair.

Otto: “You may be the central figure, but that doesn't mean that you have to do everything yourself. You have this whole carriage with you.”

Emilia: “This whole carriage?”

Otto: “Natsuki-san is at the reigns. Beatrice-chan is on guard to make sure he doesn't slack off. Garfiel is keeping lookout atop the carriage, and I am the one who planned our itinerary. What you do is thank all of us for our work, and we'll bumble our way to Pristella.”

Emilia's eyes widen, comprehending what Otto means.

And it's funny, because this indirect phrasing reminds her of someone else.

Emilia: “Otto-kun. You sound sooo much like Subaru.”

Otto: “What!? Truly!? Oh no... he must've infected me over all this time spent with him... n-no, please no, this terrifying thought just—”

Subaru: “Hey, Otto! What are you talking so cheerily about with Emilia-tan?

Emilia-tan smiles are my diet, so you better not steal any!”

Otto's shoulders hitch up as the person in question butts into the conversation. Otto's reaction makes Emilia smile, and Otto smiles back, looking defeated.

Subaru: “Come on! What's so interesting!? This isn't fair! Beatrice, take the reigns. I'm busting in.”

Beatrice: “Auh! No, in fact! Stop, I suppose! I can't... I-it'll flip over! It's going to flip over, in fact! Look, she's going to flip it over, I suppose!”

Hearing the yells from the driver's seat, Otto resignedly gets to his feet.

A certain impatient knight must be hitting his limit. Time to swap places and

visit the dragons. Emilia: "Otto-kun."

When Emilia calls Otto from behind as he prepares to move to the driver's seat. He glances back at her, and his breath catches.

Emilia's trusting smile stabs him through the chest.

Emilia: "I know I'll cause some problems, but I'll still do my best. I'm counting on you." Otto: "—Yes, please do. I'll take my own enjoyment in the scraps."

Emilia: "That also sounded kind of like Subaru."

With a bitter smile, Otto steps over to the driver's platform.

Subaru and Emilia are both devious. For Otto, stricken with an illness where he must answer to the expectations upon him, they're a lethal combination.

While all this banter unfolds, twelve days pass from their departure. Emilia's group safely arrives at the Watergate City, Pristella.

Chapter 5: The Watergate City Pristella

—Upon their arrival, Subaru and the others are greeted by towering, grand walls. Subaru: “Yeah, this looks exactly like the prison I expected it to...”

Mutters Subaru as he pokes his head out of the carriage window, Otto at the reigns. Beatrice captures Subaru's muttering, her head also out the window beneath Subaru.

Beatrice: “Joshua said it was a sightseeing spot, but Betty doubts that, in fact. It looks far more depressing than relaxing, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Agreed. I mean, I guess the bridge and gates and stuff are kinda cool.” Subaru nods in agreement to Beatrice and looks down.

Their carriage is travelling across the massive, stone Tigracy Bridge, which leads to the front gates of Pristella.

Subaru stretches slightly and looks over to the horizon, where he sees sunlight glinting on the water. To him it looks like an ocean, but since oceans don't exist in this world, it has to be a lake or a river.

Beatrice: “Pristella is a city built upon a lake, in fact. The land inside those walls becomes so flat that it forms a basin in the centre, I suppose. If you envision the city as an old trap, then of course you'd expect the centre to easily flood, in fact.”

Subaru: “You mean that thing 'bout it being a trap for some nasty witchbeast. Emilia mentioned that too. Is it actually true though?”

Beatrice: “This is my first time seeing this place, and I don't know what the specific purpose of it was either, I suppose. But I suspect it is true, now that I've seen it, in fact.”

Beatrice's bluish eyes gaze at the city's gates beyond the bridge.

The walls keep her from peering inside, but she must be imagining what the city looks like. It's unclear how precisely the books in the Forbidden Archive spoke of the world, but Beatrice's extensive knowledge has helped on more than a few occasions.

Beatrice: "...Why are you stroking Betty's head, I suppose."

Subaru: "Because it's there. I wanna spend all the time patting you that I'm able." Beatrice: "Utter nonsense, and patronising, undesired nonsense at that, in fact!"

Nevertheless Beatrice neglects to swat Subaru's hand away and he proceeds to pat her more while gazing past the bridge-railing, at the lake. The pristine waters give him a clear view to the bottom of the lake, with not a single piece of litter or pollution in sight.

If the whole lake is like this, it's an example of incredible ethics.

Subaru: "Actually I didn't notice any litter or illegally dumped industrial waste on the road either. Probably 'cause people don't have much stuff but still it's nice."

Otto: "Pristella is particularly strict on littering since it has to preserve its landscape. There will be a simple border check once we enter the gates, please don't get weirdly assertive and reject the binding paperwork they give you."

Warns Otto, having caught Subaru's muttering. Subaru tilts his head. Subaru: "Paperwork?"

Emilia: "I think you're usually exempted from it if you have a crest on your carriage when you're going to the Capital, but absolutely everyone has to fill out

paperwork to enter Pristella.”

Subaru nods, impressed, and more or less accepts it as a passport and customs check. But once again he tilts his head at the words 'binding paperwork'.

Subaru: “Is it written on paper that makes you geass yourself? Like it does something to your od once you sign, and the second you break the terms your gate stops working or something...”

Emilia: “Eek, that'd be sooo scary... there shouldn't be anything that forceful. The paperwork is just a statement that you won't do anything bad. But it means your conscience will be keeping a close eye on you.”

Subaru: “...We'd have world peace if everyone were as strict on themselves as you, Emilia-tan.” Subaru smiles wryly, aware of his own scummy personality, at Emilia's idealism.

Either way, he understands that there is paperwork, and that it is not actually binding.

Otto: “There are national laws that must be upheld, but the Mayor and Lord who manage the city have rather extensive authority there. There are many things about Pristella that simply differ from national law. The paperwork will surely mention what they are, so please refrain from mocking it and actually read it.”

Garfiel: “'S a goddamn pain. How 'bout you read it n' tell us what it said when yer done.”

Otto: “You'll never mature with that attitude. It's necessary for you to learn

how to at least skim paperwork, what with your social position. You can't just stockpile bizarre trivia from the books you like.”

Garfiel: “It ain't b'zarre trivia, 's a man's lust fer th'dramatic. Yeh, Captain?”
Subaru: “You got it.”

Garfiel balances precariously on the carriage roof as he peeks his head over and down. Subaru nods firmly in reply, Otto sighs, and Emilia watches happily. Beatrice shakes her head in lamentation.

Beatrice: “You two children are just impossible, in fact.” Otto: “They are a nightmare to herd.”

Who could guess how Beatrice's statement resounded with him.

Unfortunately for him, no one else in the carriage is capable of empathising with his grief and exhaustion.

—Patrasche roars, and everyone directs their attention to the front. The gates of Pristella stand directly before them.

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The border inspection ends with underwhelming ease.

Emilia and Otto were right. The paperwork described the terms they would have to follow to enter the city, and the rules by which they needed to abide once inside.

That said, every term was practically impossible to accidentally violate, so there's no need to pay that much conscious attention to them.

All you have to do to enter the city is read the paper, sign your name, and get

the officer's approval. The officers did panic a little once Emilia introduced herself, but being that Anastasia passed through here too, they probably figure that something is going on.

Subaru: "Guess it is pretty big news to have two girls with the right to the Throne in one place."

Emilia: "There wasn't too much fuss, so I think Anastasia let them know beforehand. Or maybe it was Joshua-kun or Mimi-chan."

Subaru: "Joshua feels possible if you ignore his clumsiness, but I seriously doubt it was Mimi." It doesn't feel like the catgirl has that kind of sensibility.

But not because she's selfish or anything. How to describe it? Subaru: "'Cause she's cute."

Emilia: "Yes, because she's cute."

And it's so mysteriously persuasive that it makes Emilia nod. Subaru crosses his arms, finding that no other word fits. Also for some reason Beatrice stomps on his foot.

Subaru kills his time by placating a displeased Beatrice, until Otto and Garfiel finally finish their drawn-out inspection and join the others beyond the gates.

Subaru: "Hey guys. What held you up?"

Otto: "Garfiel did. I've been constantly, constantly telling him to practice his writing, and still..." Subaru: "Garfiel, you can't write?"

Garfiel: "I can. 'S just, eh, puttin' it how you would yer'd call it avant garde or, eh, whatever."

Meaning his handwriting is so horrendous that the officers couldn't read it.

The officers must have offered to write for their illiterate client, but Garfiel's pride would not allow it.

Subaru: "I won't say anything against you, but you better study if you don't want this to happen again. I know you write letters to Lewes-san, and those ones have to be legible."

Garfiel: "Ha, now there's a joke, Captain. Me n' granny go way back. My nanna can read anythin' my amazin' self writes, even if it's with my left hand."

Subaru: "You aren't thinking to improve at all are you."

Says Subaru, sighing in exhaustion, to a proud Garfiel.

Garfiel's grandmother Lewes is not living with him in Roswaal's mansion. She and the twenty-four duplicates have been tasked with duties in various forests in Roswaal's domain.

Emilia and Garfiel still hold the command right for the doubles, and their orders still reach the doubles from a distance. The team is trying to utilize this and have the girls serve as middlemen for communicating orders.

Subaru proposed the idea, and Lewes carries the responsibility for the work. Garfiel opposed it all at first, but generally agrees with it now.

And so Lewes and the doubles are living in Arlam Village. The plan is to go girl-by-girl, teaching them everything they need to know, and sending them to towns and villages once they're ready.

Subaru: "It's like a huge spy operation, which kinda makes it sound bad..."

But he loathes to simply leave them there, hanging around without any role or purpose. Perhaps Subaru's guilt from discarding them in a previous loop is what spurred the idea.

Emilia: "Subaru? They finished the bag check for the carriage, let's go?" Emilia calls Subaru out of his reverie, and he hurriedly glances up.

He gives a strained smile as she looks curiously on, and grabs Pastasche's reigns. As if sensing

Subaru's unease, the smart black dragon nuzzles her snout against the back of his neck. It mystifies Subaru how relaxing the rough sensation is.

Subaru: "...Thank you, for everything."

Subaru replies to her silent compassion by stroking her hard scales. Patrasche responds with her snout, and Subaru finally tugs the reigns to set off for Pristella proper.

They exit the front gate to find a river flowing between the exterior gates and the city. They cross the stone bridge over the river, the inner gates open, and Pristella reveals itself.

Subaru: "Woah..."

Subaru sighs in admiration at the sight unfolding before him.

And he isn't the only one reacting like this. Emilia and Beatrice, seated on either side of him, also express their wonder.

He must apologize for using the word 'jail' on this aquatic city.

When Subaru first heard about Pristella, he envisioned something like the old world's Venice. He was correct to do so.

The city is circular, enclosed in turn by the circular walls.

Ignoring the fact that its size is that of a city, its shape is essentially that of a sports arena. The outer rim is the most elevated, elevation dropping the closer you get to the centre.

Dense rows of stone buildings line the tiers of the city, the most western-seeming architecture that Subaru has seen yet.

Large canals run through the town, with notably massive canals—rather, waterways—dividing the circular city into four even sections. Subaru sees several gondolas paddling on the water, and a tingle shoots down his spine at the thought: gondoliers.

The Blue City, The City of Water, The Watergate City Pristella. Each one rings true. The sight brings nothing but wonder.

Subaru: “Amazing...”

He says, and no one can deny him.

The guardsmen at the gates smile in satisfaction at the group's astonishment. Most likely, everyone who passes through these gates reacts exactly the same way.

That reaction both fulfils the guardsmen's office-bound obligations, and is the greatest of rewards to them. Definitely is. Right into their trap.

Garfiel: “Yeah, this's stunnin'. So Otto wasn't just spoutin' bullcrap.”

Garfiel recovers from the shock first and rubs the tip of his nose. But his excitement has not faded, for his cheeks remain slightly red.

His masculine passion for the dramatic must have been set alight by this amazing place (which falls under the heading of 'things that are gigantic').

Otto: “I've always wished to visit this place, connected as it is to the God of Merchants, Hoshin, but this is stupendous. It was worth visiting regardless of Hoshin.”

Otto fidgets with his hands, looking incredibly emotional.

The mention of Hoshin reminds Subaru of the name: Hoshin of the Wastes.

Subaru: “Hoshin's that guy. That one merchant guy from ages ago who made crazy riches from a burnt wasteland.”

Otto: “You're a little off, but overall correct. Four hundred years ago, Hoshin travelled the yet-untamed lands of Kararagi unaided, transformed it into an economic infrastructure using solely his own wits, and made a fortune. The man is a paragon.”

Solely because it's about a merchant, Otto's eyes blaze with passion as he tells the story of Hoshin. If he built the foundations for one of the four great countries, the Kararagi City State, then Subaru can agree with the legend being passed down.

Subaru: “Anastasia calls herself Hoshin after him too.”

Otto: “It's very bold of her. I doubt there is any way to more plainly state her enthusiasm and goals, but everyone alive is going to be sceptical. Though I do presently think she has achieved enough to warrant the name.”

Subaru: "If she's seriously doing something to warrant the name, then... well, snagging Lugnica's throne works. Just marching toward her goal."

Sincerely impressed, Subaru manages to pry himself from the beautiful scenery.

He strokes Beatrice's head and tugs Emilia's sleeve to pull them away from the mesmerising city.

Subaru: "So, Anastasia's waiting for us at the Seasyolph Lodge. Dunno where it is, but considering who she is, doubt it's someplace cheap."

Emilia: "Mm, right. I think she told the gate officers about the visit too, so it's going to be a nice place. I think Otto-kun investigated more into that..."

Otto nods and hops onto the coachman's platform. He jerks his chin, gesturing to the carriage.

Otto: "I've supposed the route, so allow me to lead. We won't be able to rush since boats have higher priority than carriages in this town. Which I note because I suspect Natsuki-san still struggles with leisurely carriage rides."

Subaru: "Oh yeah? If it was just Patrasche, I wouldn't even have to say anything just stare at her in my trembling boots, and she'd have the carriage doing whatever I want. Right?"

Subaru boldly gazes at Patrasche and winks. Patrasche looks away. Somehow, it feels like she just sighed at him.

The unexpected reaction dejects Subaru. Emilia consolingly pats his back, while Beatrice takes his hand and files him into the carriage.

Garfiel: “N' we're off!”

Announces Garfiel from his new, dedicated perch on the carriage's roof. Otto smiles wryly as he whips the reigns, and the carriage rolls into motion.

Their pace is truly slow, so sluggish that the drop in speed from the uphill inclines cannot feasibly explain it.

Subaru: “But going off what I'm seeing out the windows, there really aren't many carriages.”

Emilia: “There aren't. And look how all the roads wide enough for carriages aren't straight, they're windy, because the canals have higher priority than streets.”

Subaru: “Ah, you're right.”

Emilia is right. Footpaths and carriage roads make winding detours around the canals, which cross through the city. It is inconvenient, but stops feeling that way once Subaru watches the canals alongside the carriage, and the gondolas passing by.

Subaru: “Carriages have the Windbreaker Blessing, but do boats have anything? Like a Blessing of No Capsizing, or a Seabreeze Blessing, something.”

Emilia: “I don't really know, but I don't think the boats themselves have blessings. But maybe the boatmen have a Blessing of Lakes or Blessing of Ferrying.”

Beatrice: “Though this knowledge isn't particularly widespread, water dragons have blessings, in fact. One that protects them from the effects of water, much like those of earth dragons, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Water dragons. Wouldn't mind seeing one. And just one.” Beatrice: “I'm sure there's bound to be some in this city, in fact.”

Though she answers Subaru's question, Beatrice's reply is not proactive, what with her dislike of animals. Her strange awkwardness does not end merely with Patrasche, but apparently extends to water dragons.

Subaru: “I don't think hugging, say, a liger'd be that unpleasant.”

Beatrice: “It doesn't kill me not to touch animals, I suppose. Betty is cuter than them, in fact.”

Subaru: “Doubt fighting an animal in a match of cuteness'd go anywhere... actually you might lose a few points if you fought on the same terms?”

To Subaru's eyes, even Patrasche looks a combination of cool and cute. But a different kind of cute to Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice's cute of course.

Beatrice looks on suspiciously, while Emilia jumps excitedly on the word 'liger' and gazes at Subaru.

Emilia: “Me too! Do you think they'd let me touch them if I asked?”

Subaru: “You could've asked when Mimi was at the mansion. You get weirdly considerate about things like that.”

Emilia: “They're their riding dogs, I can't just do whatever I want with them. I've been missing the feeling of fur, since Puck hasn't been around.”

It seems that even Emilia, who loves Puck like family, has been enchanted by his fur. Subaru agrees to ask about it and Emilia starts humming happily. While hideously tone-deaf.

Listening to her shoddy humming, Subaru puts his hand to his cheek and leans on his elbow as he gazes at the cityscape. He leans on the windowframe. Beatrice gazes out the window's glass, kneeling on her seat. Subaru deliberates whether to tell her that it's bad manners to do that, when,

Beatrice: “Oh, Subaru. Here's your chance, in fact.” Subaru: “Hm? Wh—woah!”

Subaru looks over to see a giant spray of water from the canal as a passing fish—or no, it's not a fish. The creature has a long, serpentine body, alongside stubby but present limbs. It's a water dragon. Its blue, slippery skin evokes images of snakes, but its head is clearly a dragon's.

Sharp fangs crowd its mouth, and catfish whiskers extend from its snout. The earth dragon looks like a bipedal lizard, while the water dragon is more oriental. Subaru almost wants to call it Shenlong.

Subaru: “But it looks kinda stuck up, or unfriendly.”

Beatrice: “That's what it looks like to humans, I suppose. Water dragons are much more bothersome to domesticate than earth dragons, in fact. You must raise it from hatchling to adult before it recognizes you as its master, I suppose.”

Subaru: "So they take time. Me and Patrasche bonded the second our eyes met." Beatrice: "It baffles me how she's so attached to you, in fact."

It baffles Subaru too.

Though she is originally from Crusch's faction, she grew extremely attached to Subaru from the moment he picked her for the White Whale offensive. Subaru believes his choice back then, picking the highly assertive Patrasche, was the correct one.

There are so many times where he would have failed without her.

Subaru: "Hmpf. The visage of our Patrasche abounds in refinement far the superior." Emilia: "Subaru. How come you're suddenly talking like Anne?"

A strange rebellion against the water dragon, dancing through the canal, overtakes Subaru. And though the dragon couldn't have noticed his gaze, it turns to glance at him. The dragon pokes its head out of the water and screeches.

For some reason Subaru hears the "Eyes off, interlopers," loud and clear. Subaru: "I think this asshole just insulted us. Which means it's time for..." Dragon: "—ㇿ!"

As revenge, Subaru decides to mimic the roars of the giant black witchbeast he saw when the mansion was burning down.

When a sharp, dignified roar cuts through to the water. Patrasche's roar.

She perceived her master's belligerence toward the dragon and got him revenge. Subaru doesn't know what she meant with that bellow, but her voice and glare terrify the water dragon, which squeaks and slinks back underwater. Then it speeds up and carts its boat swiftly away. The boatsman panics at the sudden speed while Subaru watches on, dazed.

Subaru: "Wh-what just happened?"

Otto: “—Natsuki-san, please keep Patrasche-chan from doing anything too strange. I'd truly prefer that we didn't make a scene so shortly after entering the city.”

Scolds Otto from the driver's seat. Subaru waves at him dismissively and whistles through his fingers so that Patrasche can hear him. They can't exactly communicate by whistling, but hopefully it lets her know that he's grateful.

Subaru: “Water dragons are pretty cool, but Patrasche is the coolest.”
Beatrice: “...Ours is better than that undignified water dragon, in fact.”

Beatrice begrudgingly agrees with Subaru, perhaps because he spoke so happily.

While they cross a canal by bridge, Subaru thinks of the panoramic view of the city he saw from the gates.

Subaru: “Feels like these canals split the city into four or something.”

Emilia: “They do. The giant waterways in the middle of Pristella divide it into districts. Going clockwise from the main gates, they're District One, District Two, District Three, and District Four.”

Subaru hums.

Subaru: “Pretty uncreative naming scheme. They could've gone for something more like East Blue. Don't you agree?”

Garfiel: “That I do, Captain.”

Beatrice: “No one cares about your tastes, I suppose.”

Says Beatrice icily at the happy pair. Emilia smiles as she watches on and raises her finger, speaking as if she has read this in a book,

Emilia: “The numbered districts all have different stores and occupations, and the residential areas are concentrated in districts Two and Three, which are farthest from the gates. The Seasyolph Lodge must have lots of visiting travellers, so it'll be in District One.”

Subaru: “Which means we should be hitting it soon... or now.”

The slow carriage comes to a stop during their conversation. Apparently they've reached the inn. Otto loops around from the driver's seat and into the carriage.

Otto: “We've arrived. I'll speak with the employees to have Frufoo and Patrasche-chan moved to the stables, so feel free to... no, actually, please wait by the entrance.”

Subaru: “What changed your mind? Is it really that bad for us to go in first!?”

Otto: “It is. We don't want you to encounter Anastasia-san, and for me to come back and find she's hooked you.”

Subaru frowns at Otto's lack of trust, but nobody can refute him considering their track record. They take their hand luggage and leave the carriage while an employee escorts Otto behind the establishment, out of sight.

Subaru watches them go, stretches, and finally directs his gaze to the Seasyolph Lodge. Subaru: “Now, just what kind of lodgings have we... we.”

Subaru's jaw drops.

Emilia puts her finger to her cheek, tilting her head.

Emilia: “The building looks sooo funny. I don't think I've seen one like it.”

Garfiel and Beatrice share Emilia's candid thoughts. But Subaru gets a different impression from the place.

Of course he would. After all, Subaru: “An inn? ...This is a ryokan.”

Built of smooth wood, with sliding glass doors.

And hedges, and a gravel path from the gates to the entrance, and a tiled roof, leaving no room for doubt.

Right there in the middle of such a western city, and entirely out-of-place piece of architecture. This is the day that Natsuki Subaru meets the wafuu structure called the Seasyolph Lodge.

???: “Look at the surprise on you. Was a good choice I made, hand-picking this hotel.” When a calm, cheerful voice cuts into his stupefaction.

Still stunned, Subaru slowly redirects his gaze—beyond the hedges, to where someone peers over at their group.

She has a white fur dress and an eye-catching fox scarf. The cold season has already gone, and the dress has fabric thin enough to call in season, but the scarf could be important since it's exactly the same as ever.

A slight frame and long, wavy violet hair. A pleasant smile on her charming face, and an indecipherable glint in her aquamarine eyes.

No doubt about it. This is the one who invited them here. A direct, face-to-face welcome from Anastasia Hoshin. And,

Anastasia: “Been some time since I last seen you. Many thanks to you for coming all the way. Figures to me the journey's worn you out. How says we spend time relaxing inside, then chat?”

Before Otto can return, she easily takes the lead.

—Everyone present can see so.

Chapter 6: Two Spirit Knights, Two Greedy Merchants, and One Selfless Angel

Contrary to everyone's expectations, Anastasia seemed to be striking a preemptive blow. The atmosphere in the Water Plume Pavilion tensed.

Emilia: "—Thanks for welcoming us in person, it really makes me feel at ease."

Coming out to meet Emilia was certainly calculated. While Subaru was lost in thought, a slightly confused Emilia voiced a reply, grabbing his attention.

Anastasia cast a frown at Subaru, probably pondering the origins of Garfiel, who was standing next to him, and Beatrice, who was clinging to his sleeve. Subaru, having spent many days frolicking with them in the mansion, was steadied by their presence.

Anastasia: "—The same face as always." (*she has a kansai dialect)

Her gaze left Subaru for Emilia as she murmured to herself, her light green eyes bearing a hint of ridicule. Her relationship with Emilia had changed little in the year past; a small conflict between them wasn't unexpected.

Subaru: "Well, she's just as cute as... no, she's even cuter than before." Emilia: "Subaru, don't kid around with such a serious expression."

Hearing her response, Subaru rubbed his nose with an air of awkwardness, noting that Beatrice was paying close attention to the proceedings. The corners of Anastasia's mouth lifted in a faint smile.

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun, I heard that after the subjugation of the White Whale things went a bit awry. Are Roswaal's border territories doing well?"

Subaru: “Sorry you had to catch such unpleasant news. Thanks to your troops, we survived the aftermath. As companions, we’ll mutually support each other, right?”

Anastasia: “Is that so? I’m glad you think so, too. The two of us were glad you could come. It’s been a while since you’ve seen Julius, yes?”

Anastasia clapped her hands together, taking an opportunity to tease Subaru, who immediately caught on and frowned. Emilia and Anastasia laughed simultaneously, as Subaru grew uncomfortable, thinking that neither of them understood his complex relationship with Julius. He’d tried to explain it over and over to Emilia, but each attempt inevitably ended in failure.

Garfiel: “Ah...’s bit strange. Guess the woman’s one of Emilia-sama’s enemies?”

The previously silent Garfiel voiced a question, making no attempt to conceal his hostility. Subaru scratched his head in helpless embarrassment, and Anastasia’s round eyes grew rounder.

Emilia: “Garfiel, you’re not wrong, but you’re putting it in a pretty extreme way. After all, weren’t we invited here?”

Garfiel: “Yah but still, won’t ya hav’t stab each other in the back one day? Th’s gonna sting after acting all buddy-buddy.”

Emilia: “That's true. Garfiel's a gentle person, so I'm worried about that...”
Garfiel: “—hk! Who’s gentle! What’re ya talkin’ bout, Emilia-sama!”

As expected of him, Garfiel hurriedly tried to deflect Emilia’s words. Anastasia eyed him curiously, wondering why he seemed so embarrassed, when,

???: “Ah! Garf is here! Miss, why didn’t you tell me!?”

The wooden door of the inn was flung open with a bang. The racket was

caused by Mimi, a catgirl whose lovely face shone brightly as she saw her audience. She flew into the room and surprised everyone by firmly grasping Garfiel's arm.

Mimi: "Welcome! You're tired, you're tired, so Mimi will guide you to your room! That's where you'll be staying! Hey, you're not budging at all!"

Garfiel: "O, Oi, wait, wait! My amazin' self hasn't agreed... you're strong! What!?" Mimi: "This way! That way! Hurry!"

The petite Mimi clung to Garfiel's arm and, though he should have been strong enough to break free, he was dragged along helplessly, nonetheless. Perhaps she was using a secret technique, but it's more likely that Garfiel didn't want to distance Mimi by shaking her off. After all, despite appearances, they were supposed to be the same age.

Anastasia: "Er..."

Garfiel allowed himself to be dragged away with little resistance and Anastasia had a rare troubled look on her face, as did Emilia.

Anastasia: "Hah, Mimi has always been lively, but even so, I was a bit surprised just now." Emilia: "Ah, that's right. That's good. I thought you might have felt she left you alone."

Anastasia: "Not at all, that wouldn't be a problem. However—"

After their exchange, Anastasia's briefly softened gaze sharpened into a freezing calmness, and Subaru unconsciously moved to stand in front of Emilia.

Anastasia: "I'd like you to tell me what kind of a child he is, the one who has attracted Mimi's attention."

The dangerous question was loaded with the quiet, burning rage a woman

would hold toward pests who surrounded her cute daughter or little sister. It subtly conveyed that Mimi was loved, and, although they'd arrived early, the thought of dealing with this left Subaru exhausted.

???: "...why is it, Natsuki-san, that you suddenly have such a tired face?"

At that moment, Otto, who had returned from securing the ground dragons and their carriage, found Subaru in an exhausted state and joined their gathering.

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Pristella's famed hotel, the Water Plumage Pavilion, was tiled with wooden floor boards resembling tatami mats. This place was clearly geared toward exhausted pedestrians like Subaru, who immediately seated himself on a cushion. Beatrice calmly took a seat next to him, but Emilia and others seemed puzzled at the notion of sitting directly on the floor. The long wooden desk and the large hall were all reminiscent of a Japanese style inn, excluding the lack of an actual tatami floor.

However, a true expert like Subaru found places to detract points.

Subaru: "For example, this place lacks a sliding door and a paper door, and, unfortunately, the employees are not dressed kimonos. It's poor taste to outwardly resemble a ryokan when the atmosphere is not faithfully reproduced."

Ultimately, Subaru can't shake away the uncomfortable feeling that the setting is straight out of a fantasy in spite of the employees' clothing and

hospitality.

Subaru: "So, my grade totals to seventy points. This place is barely acceptable, but what is good is good, is how I would grade it. I hope you will work hard to improve in the future."

Beatrice: "What are you talking about, in fact?"

Subaru: "It's a kind cheap, spirited, and light-hearted kind of fun that relieves my frustration... so I'll be fine even if you let go of my hand."

Beatrice: "...just to be sure, I'll hold it for a little while longer, I suppose."

The grip on Subaru's left hand slightly strengthens, and he said no more, instead turning to face Emilia on his right. Emilia, who had been examining the strange surroundings, noticed his gaze.

Emilia: "It's so amazing, isn't it? It's only a little strange from the outside, but as soon as I enter it I feel sooo odd, sitting on the floor and taking off my shoes..."

Subaru: "I didn't have a bed in my bedroom, I had a futon on the floor. I'd be surprised if this place doesn't have any... would the employees let me have one?"

Otto: "What an unusual and unnecessary proposition... or, rather, is Natsukisan familiar with Kararagi-style customs?"

Otto, sitting opposite Beatrice, joins the conversation. The phrase 'Kararagi-style' caught Subaru's attention.

Subaru: "'Kararagi-style'? Is this building a product of it?"

Otto: "That's right, these Wafu architectural styles are designs taken from Kararagi, although their use isn't widespread here. In Kararagi itself, designs similar to the Water Plumage Pavilion's are considered traditional."

Subaru: “So why is this hotel in that style? Is it a diplomacy thing?”

This building was doubtlessly of Japanese design. Subaru wanted to confirm his suspicions on why that was.

As if to supplement Subaru’s thoughts, Otto raised a finger and spoke.

Otto: “That would be because of Pristella’s history itself. Hoshin of the Wastes was responsible for its construction. I trust you’ve heard of him?”

Subaru: “Really, I’ve heard a bit about this Hoshin of the Wastes.”

Otto: “Despite being born in such a dark age, he managed so many achievements. Even calling him a Sage wouldn’t be a stretch. However, it was due to how dazzling he was that disputes ended up happening.”

Otto’s story took place just over a hundred years ago, when Pristella was split between Lugunican and Kararagian cultures. Pristella was geographically Lugunican, but it’s founder Hoshin considered himself and was considered Kararagian. Lugunica disliked the cultural influence of Kararagi and tried to eradicate all traces of its culture, but the locals took offense and protested, which led to several territorial disputes between Lugunica and Kararagi. Eventually, diplomatic relations deteriorated to the point where both countries were on the verge of cutting off their relationship.

Otto: “Fortunately, this didn’t last. Gradually, regulations became more relaxed, and Lugunica and Kararagi mended their relations. During that period, the import of the customs of Kararagi slowed. It was probably due to that that Lugunica felt secure in letting its security measures become more lax.”

Subaru: “In any case, it’s good the problem was solved. So Kararagi customs can be traced back to Hoshin?”

Otto: “It seems so. Hoshin was a person with innovative ideas from the start. His influences on ideology, technology, and legislation were immense.”

Subaru: “—I see.”

Subaru had received his answer. Otto’s story confirmed that Kararagi’s founder, Hoshin of the Wastes, had the same identity as Subaru and Al, a person summoned from a different world.

Subaru now knew of three people who had been summonsed at various times; Hoshin from 400 years ago, Al from 20 years ago, and himself from one year ago.

Subaru didn’t understand the time gap, or why he was chosen, and it was meaningless for him to speculate wildly. But he certainly wasn’t alone. Just knowing that granted Subaru’s heart some small salvation.

Anastasia: “—It would appear that everyone’s enjoying the inn.”

A thin sliding door made of wood slid open quietly, and Anastasia, entering with perfect timing, stood at the other side with a smile.

And, standing next to her,

???: “Long time no see, Emilia-sama. I sincerely apologize for being late. I should have been the first to welcome you.”

A man with an apologetic face and a sweet, soft spoken voice. Just from hearing it, many women would assume it to be the voice of an angel. An amusing pipe dream, but the voice did have the necessary color, beauty, and strength. This was the voice of the Knight of Knights, Julius Juukulius, which existed solely to vex. At least, that was how it felt to Subaru.

Emilia: “Mm, it’s been a while, Julius. You look like you’re doing well.”

Julius: “I am grateful for your consideration. Likewise, Emilia sama’s kindness and beauty are ever the more polished. It’s as if the shade of your gaze alone strengthens this kingdom, while the rest of the world suffers a loss.”

Subaru found his speech, as always, pretentious and disgusting. Julius turned his gaze to him.

Julius: “It's been a while since we’ve met face to face. You seem lively as always, Natsuki Subaru-dono.”

Subaru: “...Stop with your phony attitude, it sends shivers down my spine. Subaru-dono my ass, you're so transparent.”

Julius; “It’s a well-known fact that you were recognized as Emilia-sama’s knight. Your former disrespect of the position should now be disregarded by both of us. First and foremost, as a knight, are you trying to behave accordingly?”

Watching Julius’s virtuous attitude, Subaru scowled.

Subaru: “Yeah, I’m her knight now. No one thought I could do it, but here I am.”

Julius: “I see. Although your position has changed, your attitude has not. —In that case, I will make due without the courtesy.”

Julius dropped his formal attitude and gave a slight smile before approaching and looking down towards Subaru who was sitting on the floor.

Julius: “Then, once again... long time no see, Natsuki Subaru. Do you work hard every day to be an honorable knight?”

Subaru: “Do you even need to ask? After all, I was beaten horribly by someone who thought I was dishonorable, or whatever.”

Julius: “It seems my reputation is being attacked. I recall it being an honorable duel.” Subaru: “Don’t oversimplify, you bastard...”

However, the one at fault was Subaru, and even if he tried to say otherwise it would only make himself look worse. So Subaru, rather than futilely defend himself, insulted Julius in a light exchange of banter. Seeing this, Julius narrowed his eyes as if to say “hmm”,

Julius: “It seems that your shortcomings have been rectified somewhat. If you learn to see things with a knight’s perspective, you would go far. Emilia-sama and Roswaal-sama have an eye for potential, it seems. Even so...”

Julius: “—?”

After appraising Subaru, Julius’s looked around until his yellow eyes stopped on Beatrice, who met his gaze steadily with her own pale blue eyes.

Beatrice: “What is it? You shouldn’t stare too hard at a lady, I suppose.”

Julius: “That was terribly rude of me. I did not expect that a high-level spirit like you would be present here.”

Beatrice: “Because Betty is Subaru’s partner, it is natural I appear here. I am on a completely different level than the quasi spirits who you have brought in. I wonder if you are afraid of me, in fact.”

Beatrice stands with her hands on Subaru's shoulders and her chest puffed up. That grumpy attitude is based on Julius’s attitude toward Subaru, who is inferior to Julius in every way except one. Both are spirit knights, but Subaru’s contracted spirit is of a higher grade.

Julius was accompanied by his six quasi-spirits corresponding to the six

attributes. Greater spirits were stronger than quasi spirits, who were stronger than lesser spirits. Taking that into consideration, it could be said that Subaru and Beatrice were the stronger team.

—However,

Subaru: “If you’re comparing actual ability, we have so many faults and are such a waste of potential that we can’t even compare to his quasi spirits.”

Beatrice: “Hmph. If he does not stop disrespecting Subaru... I will tell you what will happen if you disdain Betty's partner, even if you are a handsome man who causes Betty’s heart to waver, I suppose!”

Subaru: “A handsome man who causes your heart to waver!?”

That was hardly what Subaru wanted to hear, but it was Julius himself, the cause of the crack in their relationship, who caught the reason for it.

Julis: “Do not misunderstand, your spirit is not going to betray you. Her instinct is merely being shaken by my divine protection.”

Subaru: “Your protection...? Seriously, you also have one? What kind of protection?”

Julius: “The protection I have is the Blessing of Gathering Spirits. Simply speaking, it is a kind of blessing that garners the favor of spirits. I also have a contract with quasi-spirits of six attributes. Only with the power of that protection am I able to maintain them.”

Beatrice: “Betty will not lose! Subaru is better than you... I suppose!” Subaru: “Thank you! Please, don’t hurt me any further!”

Although the bond of trust between Subaru and Beatrice was unbreakable, he was still disappointed at his lack of a firm response. Whenever Subaru faced

Julius he would, without fail, become worked up over any of his own shortcomings. That was the main reason for his former hatred of Julius.

Anastasia: “As usual, our knight is attentive to Natsuki-kun.”

Julius: “Not at all. I am merely discussing the attitude of a knight as his senior. The knights of the kingdom of Lugunica may be judged from his behavior.”

Anastasia: “Well, Natsuki-kun already has a reputation as a knight, doesn’t he? That Julius really is dishonest.”

In response to Anastasia’s teasing, Julius lowers his head and nods silently. Anastasia probably would have won anyway, only to be smug about it later. Their motions had that air of familiarity.

—Beatrice patted Subaru’s left shoulder, while Emilia his right.

Beatrice: “Don’t be too worried, in fact. Looks aren’t everything, I suppose.”

Emilia: “I’m glad that Subaru and Julius are getting along, I’d be happy if you two became good friends.”

How would other people view this? All Subaru could receive from them was unhelpful comfort. He scratched his cheek with frustration as Anastasia took a seat across from him.

Subaru: “Come to think of it, why are only the two of you here? Mimi and Garfiel... are probably on a date, but...”

Anastasia: “It’s like you said, Mimi is with the blond child right now. Hetaro adores his sister and is probably keeping an eye on them, and Tivey is probably keeping an eye on Hetaro.

That's why they're not with me at the moment."

Subaru: "Did Ricardo not come? I know that the kitten triplets are pretty strong, but isn't it comforting to have a full grown knight around?"

It was odd that the triplets were here, but Ricardo, who usually handled their antics, was missing, as was Julius's brother Joshua.

Julius: "Unfortunately, we're not just in Pristella for fun. Ricardo and my brother Joshua have business elsewhere. You should have met him by now, yes?"

Subaru: "Yeah... and he's a lot like you. If his frame were a little steadier, he could play you perfectly. Actually, he should do that anyway. You can leave now."

Julius: "I'll keep your interesting opinion in mind, but that would be difficult for Joshua. He's not a child well suited for excessive travel. Frustratingly, I hold several concerns about him, as his older brother."

To Subaru's annoyance, Julius took him seriously and began worrying about Joshua. Otto interrupted Subaru's awkward silence by clearing his throat.

Otto: "Ehm — I don't mind this casual atmosphere, but now that almost everyone's here, could we all give introductions?"

Anastasia: "I'd like introductions too, since the only people here I really know are Emilia-san and Natsuki-kun. I especially want to hear more about this competent seeming officer and the powerful great spirit-chan."

Otto: "Oioi, it's really not like you to be lacking information, Anastasia-sama. Is something amiss in your reports?"

Anastasia: "I can imagine why you would have that impression, but I think it would be best if we don't get into whose information is accurate!"

Dodging a question by the competent seeming officer, she gives a nod to Julius.

Julius: "Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Julius Juukulius of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica, although presently I am only serving as Anastasia-sama's knight."

Julius gave Otto a slight bow, who nodded in response to his elegant gesture. Julius then moved on to an introduction of his master, Anastasia.

Julius: "I present one the candidates for king of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Anastasia Hoshin, the gifted businesswoman who runs Kararagi's Hoshin Company."

Otto: "Right... right, yes!"

Subaru: "Don't bow to just an introduction!"

Otto: "—hk! It was a mistake, the momentum was overwhelming!"

Subaru gave the back of Otto's head a whack, as Anastasia watched, pleased with Julius's introduction.

Subaru: "Don't be intimidated by titles! Our Emilia-tan is a wonderful candidate for the same throne, and she won't lose to Anastasia!"

Emilia: "Mm, that's right. I'm also a candidate, so I'll do my best." Subaru: "Ahhhh, you're so cute. I can't help but say EMT!" Emilia: "I'm somewhat troubled that I find your antics calming..."

Seeing their typical, pointless, banter, Otto regains his composure and faces the opposing camp.

Otto: "Thank you for your detailed introduction. I'm slightly late in saying this, but I'm Otto Suwen, Emilia-sama's Minister of Internal Affairs... Yes, thanks to a certain circumstances caused by a certain someone, a Minister of Internal Affairs is indeed what I am."

Subaru: “There seems to be bitterness about that decision.”

Otto: “Originally I was going to be a simple merchant, but now what has become of me...”

Although his voice echoed with lament, Subaru stood firm, refusing to give Otto the opportunity to escape. Anastasia stuck her tongue out, in a show of sympathy for Otto.

Next, everyone turned to Beatrice. Seeing their gazes, she presented her small frame openly and squarely then declared,

Beatrice: “Betty is the great spirit Beatrice, I suppose. I am Subaru's contract spirit, I suppose. As you can see, I rank highly both as a spirit and in cuteness, in fact. I would appreciate some delicious tea and a sweet snack, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Maintain dignity until the end!”

It would always be in Beatrice’s nature to be a mascot character.

Subaru pulled her into his lap and began stroking her hair while she glared, displeased.

Subaru: “Well, that’s why she’s is in a contract with me.”

Julius: “I did believe you had a good compatibility with your spirit, and I wouldn’t call this unexpected, but I didn't imagine a contract with a great spirit like Beatrice-sama would resemble this.”

Subaru: “Don’t praise my Beako too much. She’s just like her family, anything nice will just go to her head.”

Beatrice: “Hmph. I’m declaring my displeasure with that hasty treatment, in

fact.”

Beatrice gave him a look suggesting that she barely accepted him, and Subaru patted her cheek in response. Now that things had calmed down,

Otto: “Well, introductions are over and the atmosphere seems to have calmed down for time being. So, let’s talk business, yes?”

As Emilia’s Minister of Internal Affairs, it was Otto’s role to take the lead in conversations like this and prevent them from being derailed. Anastasia answered while fiddling with her white fox fur scarf.

Anastasia: “Eh...? Well, it is our job as the hosts to entertain our guests. If you like.” Otto: “Well then. First of all, what are your reasons for inviting us to Pristella?”

Anastasia: “Don’t worry, you don’t need to be so on guard. I’m not planning anything. A year has passed since the king's election started, and we haven’t had opportunities to see each other recently, so I thought I’d just set one up.”

Most people would be easily mislead by her gentle demeanor, but Otto was a veteran at negotiating. The conversation had turned into a battle between merchants.

Otto: “Taking our situation into consideration, we’re here because you lured us with bait. It’s only natural that we would be cautious.”

Ana: “Well, we did invite you here for a reason. There are souvenirs in Pristella that you would want, aren’t there? Think of this as a gift.”

Subaru: “...how did you know which gift we would want?”

Ana: “It’s sort of company secret, Natsuki-kun. We’ll just say that I’m an

inquisitive gal and leave it at that.”

Anastasia covered her mouth while laughing. It would be a stretch to say she was making fun of Subaru’s frustration, but that was how it felt. Aware of his angst, Beatrice could not help but sigh, while Subaru wondered how Anastasia learned of their circumstances.

Emilia: “It’s not something I was hiding, so it was inevitable for that information to leak.”

Emilia’s frank admission assuaged a part of Subaru’s worries, and Anastasia blinked in Emilia’s direction, who responded by tilting her head.

Emilia: “From this point onwards, I think that it would be better if everyone would appreciate what Anastasia’s done, instead of being suspicious of her.”

Anastasia: “...to respond to your enemy in such a well intentioned way. Besides, I’m not helping you purely for your benefit, Emilia-san.”

Emilia: “But, thanks to you, I have a way to find what I’ve been looking for. Thank you. I don’t know how I can repay you, but I truly do thank you.

Anastasia: “———”

Anastasia’s eyes widened at Emilia’s smiling response. To her surprise, Julius, seated next to her, softened his gaze, earning himself a glare.

Anastasia: “Is something strange, Julius?”

Julius: “No, it’s merely that your surprised expression is so rare. I think that it is just as beautiful as your natural, unaffected face.”

Anastasia: “Trying to escape with flattery... well, I still appreciate those sweet

words.”

With the help of Julius’s words, Anastasia shook off her surprise and regained her usual tone. Then she fixed a sharpened gaze on a curious Emilia.

Anastasia: “Emilia-san, it’s been a year and you still have a disadvantage that you need to work around.”

Emilia: “Mm, I’m lacking in many areas and causing everyone so much trouble, so I’m trying hard to catch up as soon as I...”

Anastasia: “One correction; your greatest disadvantage isn’t that. It’s that you resemble a the terrifying witch from the stories.”

Anastasia exhales deeply and smiles, causing Emilia to stiffen in shock at her sudden change in attitude. Disregarding her, Anastasia turned to Subaru and Otto.

Anastasia: “What about you two? Will you continue to support her? If you do, her reputation will affect your own.”

Subaru: “I will, and I’ll do my best to, because it’s my policy to praise and support her no matter what!”

Otto: “Because of that, most of the burden lands on me. Funnily enough, I have no way out either...”

Subaru throwing a thumbs up, Otto glaring with a bitter gaze. Seeing their conflicting attitudes, Anastasia readjusted her scarf.

Anastasia: “Well, it's fine. You surely understand the value of gratitude, after all.”

Otto: “Gratitude, huh? Gratitude is great. You don't have to keep it in the inventory, and there's no deadline attached to it.”

Anastasia: “Yep, isn't that right? And most importantly—”

Otto's words matched Anastasia's as the two each revealed the face of a merchant. Anastasia and Otto: “—You don't have to put a price tag on it.”

They spoke unanimously.

Anastasia clapped her hands as Otto drooped his shoulders. It seemed that this was an established saying. Their perspectives on gratitude were chillingly identical.

Anastasia: “Now, back to what Emilia-san needs... a colorless magical ore, one of the highest possible grade of purity.”

Emilia: “Yes, that's right, can you tell me what you know?”

On the way to Pristella, Emilia, having consciously realized that she had been acting out of selfishness, had felt guilty and hadn't wanted to involve Subaru and Otto and the others.

Nevertheless, with the opportunity right in front of her, she of course needed to act. She was closer than ever to seeing her precious family again.

Ana: “The best supplier of high density ore is Muse Company. The person responsible for it currently resides in this town, Kiritaka Muse—a man whose heart was stolen by a songstress.”

Chapter 7: The Sinful Man Sets Sail

Subaru: “His heart was stolen by a Songstress... is that a nickname? It doesn’t sound cool at all, but he’s using it as if it is.”

Upon hearing Subaru’s response, Anastasia laughs before playing with the tips of her soft hair. Anastasia: “You’re right, it sounds more like a nickname than a title. But, that’s what he claims.

‘My heart was stolen by a Songstress.’”

Subaru: “Eh, what does that even mean?”

Anastasia: “His heart was stolen by a woman, and he proudly and publicly announces it— doesn’t that remind you of what happened during the Royal Selection in the capital?”

Subaru: “Leave that dark, embarrassing history out of this.”

Subaru’s face twists just thinking of the humiliation at Julius’s hands. It made him want to grab his head and roll on the floor. Even though he still believed he was in the right, his way of expressing his thoughts left much to be desired. Anyway,

Subaru: “I see what you mean though. Although I regret to admit it, I can actually relate. Then, what’s he like?”

Anastasia: “The nickname is rather excessive, but the man himself is both responsible and flexible. Being named heir to Muse Company takes more than just being the eldest son. There’s no need to doubt him as a businessman.”

Otto: “I can also guarantee that, Natsuki-san. The young master of Muse

Company... Kiritaka Muse, is famous indeed. His skill is astounding, even without Muse Company's already famous reputation for dealing with magical ore."

As a merchant, Otto also knew of Kiritaka. However, after agreeing with her appraisal, he cast a sharp glare at Anastasia.

Otto: "Indeed, Emilia-sama needs pure magical stones from a professional supplier, and we sent inquiry to Muse Company... but they weren't open to negotiation. It does make one wonder how and why Anastasia-sama is securing their aid."

Anastasia: "Perhaps it is a matter of trust? Maybe it is a matter of sincerity. Whatever the case, one side must be willing to approach the other in order to establish a working relationship, don't you agree?"

Otto: "...I guess you could say that."

Otto gave up on challenging the impassive Anastasia, who had been feigning a poor understanding of the situation. He moved on to discuss the magical stones themselves.

Otto: "First of all, do they actually have the rare magical stone we're looking for?"

Anastasia: "I can understand your suspicions, but I'm sure you realize it would be obvious if we were simply lying about a prominent trader."

Otto: "I see. Then, are there any other conditions, or is it alright for us to negotiate with him?"

Anastasia: "You're quite worried, but it's fine. Remember, I was simply aware of the location of the magical ore that Emilia-san's faction was looking for, and I've already explained why I gave you that information."

As Anastasia had said, gratitude required no price tag.

Otto, understanding this, relented his questioning of Anastasia. Seeing their conversation draw to a close, Emilia raised a nervous hand.

Emilia: "Um, is it okay if I ask something?"

Anastasia: "Please, go ahead. Anything involving our business and personal relationships are a matter of trust. Clearing doubts will give us peace of mind."

Emilia: "It seems this doesn't have much to do with money, does it..."

Anastasia: "This is more than just a matter of hourly wages, after all. Well, that's to be expected. Don't you agree, Natsuki-kun?"

Anastasia smiled at Subaru, who gave an indifferent shrug in response. Emilia continued to ask her questions,

Emilia: "You've told us a little about Kiritaka-san, but I'm still curious about the Songstress you mentioned. Is she someone famous?"

Although it was a simple question, Subaru also wanted an answer. As far as he knew, Kiritaka's surname, Muse, was something like a Goddess of Song in his world's mythology. It was an odd coincidence, but it could simply have been his fate to fall for a songstress.

Subaru: "I wonder if she's supposed to be some kind of mythical figure. Of course, she's not as influential as Hoshin of the Wastes. Actually, if Hoshin had fallen for someone mythical, it would have probably been a disaster."

Julius: “Rest assured, the Songstress Liliana-san is very real and currently remains in Pristella. Having been taken in by Kiritaka-san... that’s what her position is like right now.”

Subaru: “Currently... is that different from her normal situation?”

Julius: “I heard that she was originally a poetic bard who sang and travelled. Kiritaka-san saw one of her concerts, and the situation became what it is now.”

Listening to Julius' answer, Subaru pictured a bird caught in a birdcage. Birds were animals who could live freely until they caught the eye of a master who would entrap them. Was that what Liliana's situation was like? Did Kiritaka's paranoid affection keep Liliana trapped?

Subaru: “That’s an unpleasant story. Her singing shouldn’t be meant for just one person, she should do it freely.”

Julius: “I do agree with that, but there may be a misunderstanding here. Although, given Kiritaka-san’s obsession with Liliana, it may be an inevitable conclusion.”

Subaru: “My opinion of this Kiritaka guy just lowered somewhat. Will the negotiation really be fine? It’s hard to imagine communicating with someone like that.”

A greedy and disgusting rich man comes to mind, one who was gluttonous and lustful. As Otto had mentioned earlier, it was strange of him to turn a blind eye to Emilia’s seemingly innocent search for magical ore. Subaru’s impression of the man was poor indeed.

Subaru: “I’m not looking forward to showing my pretty Emilia-tan to such a person.”

Julius: “Him seeing Emilia-sama shouldn’t be a problem. Kiritaka-san is a little difficult to handle, but he wouldn’t be so indiscreet. However...”

Julius broke off, as if unsure how to continue, leaving Subaru puzzled at his

rare hesitation. Finally, Julius sighed quietly and shifted his gaze from Emilia to Subaru.

Julius: "It might be best not to bring Beatrice-sama with you." Subaru: "What's that supposed to mean!?"

Anastasia: "Well, Kiritaka-san and I are on good terms, so I've spoken with him enough to imagine what he would think."

Julius's and Anastasia's words.

They lead to only one conclusion. Subaru stands up and,

Subaru: "... He's a lolicon!?"

Julius: "It's something that people can only speculate on. In other words, it's an unconfirmed rumor. In any case, his tastes don't change how charming Anastasia-sama is."

Anastasia: "Your words lack elegance."

Elegant or not, Anastasia didn't seem to mind what Julius said. Subaru's theory wasn't refuted and he accepted that it was true. Even so, he thought to himself, are you serious.

Subaru: "More annoying lolicons, as if Clind-san weren't enough trouble..."

Recalling the universally competent butler, Subaru wanted to bury his head in his hands. However, there was definitely a difference between Clind and Kiritaka's tastes. Clind would probably show no interest in Anastasia. What Clind sought was inner youth and it was reflected by his attitude toward Emilia. He saw her inner immaturity and respected her as a loli in spirit.

—On the other hand, Kiritaka was a person who places emphasis on external appearances. Anastasia was probably around the same age as Subaru, but she looked significantly younger. Since her body has little potential for further development, she could be considered a legal loli. Kiritaka's inclination to like her was obvious. And Beatrice...

Subaru: "Our Beako is a versatile loli that can accommodate the tastes of both Clind and

Kiritaka..."

Beatrice: "I did not quite understand that, but I feel like it was a very rude comment, in fact."

Subaru: "Idiot! Ugh. I'm worried about you! You... you have have a dangerous appeal. You'll make me worry if you're not more aware!"

Beatrice: "I-, ah, mm... i-if you're that worried, then I suppose you're not doing anything wrong. Hehehe."

Although she didn't share Subaru's panic, Beatrice happily grabbed on to the hem of Subaru's sleeve. For the time being, Subaru was going to hold onto her tightly. As long as they were in this city, it would be a good idea to keep an eye on her.

Emilia: "So, um, does he just like short people?"

Anastasia: "Such an innocent response. No, it's more like he's the type of person who likes eating fresh, immature fruits..."

Subaru: "STOOOOOOP!! Don't say such dirty things to my angel! I understand now! No more is needed! Yes? Stop, stop!"

Subaru guarded Beatrice with his left hand and Emilia with his right. Anastasia

laughed at Subaru's overprotectiveness while Julius showed a wry smile.

Otto: "Setting aside Natsuki-san's attitude, we accept your conditions. If possible, I would like to meet Kiritaka-san. Would I find him in Pristella's Chamber of Commerce?"

Anastasia: "That's right. Well, Kiritaka-san is pretty busy, seeing as he has to run many of the city's functions. I wonder which building you would find him in."

Anastasia responded to Otto's serious question with light teasing, who could only helplessly accept her answer. Otto brings his hand to his chin, then turns to Subaru.

Otto: "As expected, even the first step will be difficult. I would like to set up a safe place to calmly talk things through beforehand, but... where should we go?"

Subaru: "That's right... well, to be honest, I have no idea where anything is. So I was planning to just wander around."

From the main gate, Pristella didn't appear too large, but as an outsider, navigating the unfamiliar townscape would be a nightmare. Subaru is confident in his sense of direction, but how useful was that confidence in a town where travel was conducted by waterway?

Otto: "Perhaps, there are people giving tours along the waterway—after all, many tourists come here, and there are probably people who are giving tours to capitalize on that."

Subaru: "That wouldn't work, I'd definitely get seasick. Once in elementary school, I got so seasick crossing a lake on a field trip that people made fun of me for being drunk."

Beatrice: "I don't quite understand what that means, but you look like you have bad memories of it, in fact."

Looking at a reminiscing Subaru, Beatrice voiced her pity. In any case, Otto's

suggestion was probably the best, so Subaru would have to accept it. When,

Julius: "Forgive me for interrupting your discussion, but that worry is needless." Emilia: "What do you mean, Julius?"

Emilia turned to look at Julius, who smiled faintly.

Julius: "It's simple. We've already sent messengers to correspond with Kiritaka-san." Emilia: "Messengers?"

Julius: "My younger brother Joshua, of course. Ricardo is accompanying him."

Subaru was glad to finally know where those two were, but he was also somewhat annoyed. Although they were addressing a natural obligation,

Subaru: "It would have been nice if they were here to welcome us."

Julius: "Since we invited you, it's our duty to handle these arrangements. You don't need to be worried about the finer subtleties. They're not worth mentioning."

Subaru: "Don't bring them up then!"

Their banter was the same as always. On one hand, Subaru's respect for Julius's faction grew, but on the other, he was deeply troubled by his own faction's lack preparation. Anyway,

Anastasia: "In that case, you're probably all anxious, but we should probably wait for the two of them to come back. Speaking of which, my personal bodyguard hasn't returned."

Subaru: "Oh, right."

Subaru assumes a more relaxed posture and sits down. He prepares himself to answer questions about the absent Garfiel. Anastasia immediately follows that lead,

Anastasia: “As you can see, Mimi is absent—what’s she doing? That child accompanying her... the one named Garfiel. Tell me about him.”

Subaru: “His name is Garfiel Tinsel. He’s 15 years old, the age where kids dream too much. He’s in the habit of biting things and snoring loudly. But, other than that, he’s an honest, straightforward kid. Even if his feelings are battered, his naive way of looking at things won’t change. He’s that kind of pure youth.”

Anastasia: “That’s likely true.”

‘I don’t want my cute little sister stolen from me,’ seemed to be what Anastasia is desperately, but sweetly, thinking. Even without considering his potential relationship with

Mimi, Subaru thought of Garfiel as a cute little brother, and believed in making his value known.

Emilia: “I wonder what Songstress-san’s famous voice sounds like. I feel sooo anxious. I wonder if she’d perform for me if I gave her a request.”

Julius: “Don’t worry, Liliana is someone well-versed in social customs. So if she’s present at your meeting with Kiritaka-san, I’m sure she’d be eager to perform.”

Emilia: “Wa, that’s right. It sounds fun.”

—Meanwhile, Julius’s words seemed to further Emilia’s interest in the Songstress. Otto, seeing the dialogue between the two groups, sighed.

Otto: “Since we’re in opposing factions, I thought relationships would be

more tense... did I overthink things?”

Beatrice: “You don’t need to be discouraged, in fact. You’re not thinking too much, Subaru and Emilia aren’t thinking enough, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s rare show of sympathy confirmed Otto’s suspicions that he will be mentally and physically overtaxed during his stay in Pristella.

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Joshua had returned, while Garfiel was soon to arrive as well.

Joshua: “Kiritaka-san is usually busy, but rather than being at the city hall today, he’ll be at his office in the Muse Company Headquarters, so this is an ideal time to visit him.”

Anastasia: “That’s that, then. Mm, you did well, Joshua.”

Joshua, upon returning to his older brother and his lady, makes his report. After Anastasia nodded, satisfied, Joshua turned his gaze to Subaru.

Joshua: “...thank you for coming such a long way. I’m sure you’ve heard the story from Anastasia-sama by now, but we’ve established contact with Kiritaka-san.”

Subaru: “Oh, thanks a lot. That saves us loads of time.”

Joshua: “I do not enjoy helping you, I’m just following Anastasia-sama’s orders. I really wanted to avoid having my brother meet you.”

Subaru: “You’re honest, as usual.”

Julius's eyes widened at Joshua's frank speech. He was apparently unaware of the animosity Joshua held toward Subaru.

Julius: "Joshua. Everyone present, including him, are here under Anastasia-sama's invitation. Being rude to our guests will hurt Anastasia-sama's reputation, so please refrain from doing so."

Joshua: "...my sincere apologies, brother."

(uses -sama honorific)

Julius sighs at Joshua, whose gaze had turned sulky. He then turned to Subaru and said apologetically,

Julius: "Apologies. From both of us. Usually, my brother does not engage in this kind of behavior... it seems that it's being caused by the unfamiliar environment."

Subaru: "I don't mind if you guys do it separately, but being picked on by both brothers together in this environment is kind of scary for me, too."

Julius: "Heh. We'll keep that in mind."

Julius responded to Subaru's words with a mixture of humor and irony. Joshua looked unsatisfied, but when Subaru caught his eye, he turned away. Was the reason intense jealousy?

Emilia: "Well, thanks to your favor, we can go visit Kiritaka-san now. Can we consider the inn a place to stay afterward?"

Anastasia: "Feel free to do so. The Water Plumage Pavilion is a lodging with a great track record, both in atmosphere and comfort. Please look forward to dinner."

Emilia: “That’s true. In that case, we’ll look forward to it.”

Emilia smiled at the confident Anastasia, running a hand through her long silver hair.

Emilia: “We’ll be sure to speak properly with Kiritaka-san first so that we can enjoy a delicious dinner without any worries.”

As Emilia finished talking, she stood up to leave the inn. Subaru followed behind her as they made their way toward the the ship that Joshua had secured for them, when,

???: “Oi, Captain! Wait there! I’m tellin’ ya!”

Garfiel hurriedly leapt in front of the inn to intercept them. His shining blonde hair and clothes were slightly dirtied, and his expression was tired.

Garfiel: “Ah...h... foun’ya. Not fer th’ dog faced guy, don’t think I’d ‘f survived.”

Subaru: “By dog faced guy, do you mean Ricardo? Were you on a sweet date with Mimi, before her big, scary uncle interrupted?”

Garfiel: “A date? It’s no joke! Soon’s that midget dragged me ‘way, ‘nother midget same’s her attacked me ‘n nearly killed me. If I fought back, they’d prob’ly start cryin’, so instead I jus’ spent t’day runnin’ away...”

From Garfiel’s story, Subaru surmised that it had been Ricardo who had prevented that tragedy. Mimi, of course, had two twin brothers who could have caused it. Perhaps it was Tivey, whose calm disposition could have been hiding a sharper side. Or perhaps Hetaro, fearing that his sister would be taken away,

had displayed his siskon tendencies for the first time. Whoever it had been, the situation seemed fine now.

Garfiel: “So, seein’s I didn’ want’b excluded’m yer plans, I rushed over here, Captain.”

Subaru: “Ah, my bad. We were planning on meeting the guy who’s selling the magical ore. Thinking on it, I guess we should’ve waited for our bodyguard.”

Garfiel: “Th’s obvious, ya?”

Subaru added the relieved Garfiel to his party and made way for the docks. The boat that Subaru’s group was going to ride on had already been prepared. All of the boats were fairly small with only enough room for eight people, including the boat’s sailor.

Sailor: “There’s a city law about boat size. If the boats are too large, the waterways get clogged, and it’s unsafe if boats get too close together.”

The dark-skinned sailor steering their boat was happy to answer Subaru’s questions. Dragon carriages on wide highways weren’t much of a problem, but on waterways, traffic rules needed to be set.

Sailor: “If a collision happens and a ship sinks, that’s usually regarded as the fault of the sailor’s lack of technique. Besides, a lot of these ships have been passed down from generation to generation, so losing one would mean losing your reputation as well.”

Subaru: “Of course. Regarding the ships water dragons... are there any conflicts between them?” Sailor: “The water dragons live here and, in a way, they manage to be polite with one another.

Like land dragons, they have good instincts and can be trusted to handle a

smaller boat. You should try one out if you have the chance”

Subaru remembered the way he felt the first time he saw a land dragon and was excited by the sailor’s recommendation. Maybe his first ride with a water dragon would evoke the same sense of wonder.

Emilia: “This is my first time crossing water with a ship. I’m soooo excited.”

Subaru: “Is that so? Well, this does feel different than the sea.”

Emilia: “What is the ‘sea’?”

Subaru: “Imagine an endless pool of water. My hometown was right next to it.” Emilia: “Hmmm... but, that would be nice when you felt thirsty.”

Subaru laughs in response to Emilia’s childlike answer. Unfortunately, drinking sea water when you’re thirsty would lead to death. Regardless, he couldn’t mention that sea water is saltwater without it raising more questions.

Otto: “Where there's a river there’s usually a bridge, but if you need to smuggle without crossing a bridge, your only other option is going by boat.”

Subaru: “Sure sounds like you're talking from experience.”

Otto: “I-It's not like I've ever done anything like that! I-It's just, second hand knowledge! Stop casting such strange suspicions on me, really!”

Garfiel: “Otto-nii, ya really sweatin’ over there.”

As if ignoring Otto’s suspiciously specific denial, the boat followed the sailor’s movements as it turned to join the main waterway ahead. Incredibly, the current was flowing against the direction of the boats.

Subaru: “What, how is the water flowing like this?”

Emilia: “Hehehe. I actually know the answer to that. Look, see the city walls.”

She lightly patted Subaru's shoulder and pointed into the distance with her free hand. Subaru cast his gaze in that direction and saw the great stone towers stationed on the city's walls. There were four of these towers, oriented north, south, east, and west of the city.

Emilia: "Those towers control the flow of water in the town. It uses a sophisticated magical mechanism that operates with the power of a magical water stone. It seems that the big floodgates in the city are also controlled by it."

Subaru: "Wow, that is incredible. This is even cooler than the travel laws."

Thanks to Emilia's explanation, Subaru more or less understood the mysterious mechanism behind the flowing water. Sure enough, the Watergate City Pristella was very different from the others, and Subaru still had much he needed to learn about it, including the city's laws.

Subaru: "The laws here are closely related to the operation of the city, right?"

Emilia: "Is this about Kiritaka-san? Like I said. I wonder what kind of a person he is... it would

be great if he gave us the magical ore upon hearing our story."

Touching the pendant hanging on her chest, Emilia murmured her hopes uncertainly. While listening to her murmurs, Subaru placed his hands on his chin and closed his eyes. Then, he swayed his head along with the movement of the boat and whispered,

Subaru: "———."

Beatrice: "...I didn't catch what you said just now, I suppose."

Beatrice was probably the only one who could hear him. Upon hearing her loud voice, everyone turned to stare at him. Feeling their gazes fixed on him,

Subaru smiled and said,

Subaru: “Crap, I’m gonna puke.”

—In that moment, a fuss was created.

Chapter 8: Travelling With Seasickness

Beatrice: “You should be better now, I suppose.”

Subaru: “No, wait a little more. Wow, this is terrible, the world is still shaking. I’m still shaking. Even death can’t cure this sickness...”

On a street facing a large aqueduct, Subaru and Beatrice sat side by side, their feet dangling over the side of the waterway. Together, they admired the flow of the clear water. Passerbys smiled faintly upon seeing them. Perhaps they assumed they were siblings, or perhaps they thought they were tourists who had never seen such structures.

Subaru: “Neither of those assumptions are entirely wrong... but it’s sad that they don’t really know what our relationship is. Ueh.”

Beatrice: “You should focus on recovering rather than pointlessly worrying, in fact. I wonder why you think Betty is here, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Were you worried that I’d be lonely? Beako is so kind.”

Beatrice: “...that’s irrelevant, in fact. Just hurry up and get better, I suppose.”

In order to accommodate the weight of Subaru leaning against her, Beatrice strained her small frame. Seeing this, Subaru’s love for her increased exponentially. Could it ever stop growing?

About fifteen minutes ago, Subaru had been forced to continue his journey on foot after the fuss he had created with his seasickness. Emilia, Otto, Garfiel remained on the boat to head for the negotiations with the Muse Company and Kiritaka.

Originally, Emilia had also wanted to accompany Subaru on foot, but Otto had said, “The longer we keep the other party waiting, the worse our impression will be”. Heeding his advice, she left Subaru behind. It was most likely the right decision.

Subaru: “Well, even if Anastasia had told us to be careful... in broad daylight, most people probably aren’t going to try anything.”

Certainly, there was anxiety in being left alone in an unfamiliar city after being invited there by a political opponent, but there was an escort named Garfiel to deal with that. However, the

currently alone Subaru was important enough to Emilia Camp that an attack on him wasn’t completely inconceivable.

Even so, if Anastasia had malicious intent, she was too savvy to orchestrate an attack on him in the middle of the day. In addition, Subaru trusted that Julius wouldn’t condone any type of ambush.

Subaru: “As he had said, a knight must remain chivalrous at all times...”

Beatrice: “Subaru. It’s rather annoying when you laugh to yourself, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Wait, I totally wasn’t laughing! Well, I’d never think of that guy and laugh! Anyway, let’s go.”

Subaru stood up and took a deep breath, rubbing his arms and neck lightly. Although they still felt a little heavy, the seasickness was mostly gone. He could more or less move around normally again.

Beatrice: “Well, Betty will help if needed, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Ohh, I’m counting on you. Even so, I doubt anything will happen. Only an idiot would attack us in broad daylight with so many people around.”

All of the king candidates needed to keep an eye on their reputation. In public, they needed to appear both pleasant and authentic. Emilia, who was a naturally honest and kind girl, did not need to worry herself about pretenses.

Subaru: “In other words, Emilia’s real advantage over the other candidates is her angelic innocence...!”

Beatrice: “Your thoughts are going in an unpleasant direction, in fact. — Subaru, Subaru, look, let’s go that way, I suppose. Follow me.”

In the past year, Beatrice had become entirely accustomed to putting up with the easily distracted Subaru. She had been navigating through the unfamiliar cityscape with ease while leading him by hand. Muse Company’s headquarters was apparently located at the boundary between the first and second districts. Subaru, having been seasick, had only dimly registered the directions, but Beatrice had memorized them all. If they had one problem, it would be the complexity of Pristella’s pathways.

Although they had arrived by following the main canal, they had to take detours around the several small waterways feeding into the main one. Sometimes there were bridges, but on several occasions Subaru needed to jump over a narrow waterway while carrying Beatrice.

Beatrice: “Subaru, that is a splendid fountain, I suppose.” Subaru: “You’re right... Beako, how did we get to the park?”

The fountain which had caught Beatrice’s attention stood in the center of a park. It was surrounded by well maintained flowerbeds and children playing games. This was indeed a peaceful and relaxing sight. The only issue was,

Subaru: “Is this where we’re suppose to be going? This is the last place I’d picture finding the heir of a large company. If businessmen made deals here, then all of their money would get wet.”

Beatrice: “I wonder if seasickness makes you cynical, I suppose. That’s the first thing you think of upon seeing this beautiful scenery... Betty feels sorry for you,

in fact.”

Subaru: “The old you would have blushed and tried to hide this mistake, but now you’re becoming rather fresh... you’re breaking your father’s heart.”

Beatrice: “Y-You’re four hundred years too early to be calling yourself Betty’s father! Subaru lacks consciousness in discussing such matters, in fact!”

Subaru was unsure why Beatrice had overreacted to the latter half of his sentence, but didn’t pursue the issue. Their problem right now was figuring out how they arrived at the park.

Subaru: “Beako. Since you were leading me so confidently, I thought you knew the way?”

Beatrice: “I know the destination, in fact. However, the roads were complicated, I suppose. In order to avoid getting lost, I used the ‘left-hand method’ that I’d read about before. It didn’t work, I suppose.”

Subaru: “The ‘left hand method’?”

Beatrice: “Holding out your left hand and following the wall, in fact.” Subaru: “Isn’t that for mazes!?”

Beatrice’s method was the a well known tactic in conquering a maze. Subaru recognized its effectiveness, but there were a number of drawbacks, too. Namely,

Subaru: “If you start using the left hand method in the middle of a maze, you might end up touching the inside wall and never be able to leave! Furthermore, we’re not in a maze, we’re in a city!”

Beatrice: “Hmph! It’s just like Subaru to disregard tried and tested wisdom, I suppose. Betty was a librarian managing a forbidden archive. She pities any fool who disregards the wisdom of history, in fact.”

Subaru: “I’m not a fool, you’re a fool for assuming you understand

everything!”

She was old enough to be self-righteous (400 years) but it took her long enough to enter the outside world (400 years) that there was a big enough gap (400 years) between her logic and common sense. And so, she was a surprisingly unreliable loli.

Beatrice: “I wonder if Subaru has a better idea, in fact. Let’s see you try, I suppose.” She put her hands on her waist, fixating on Subaru with a disagreeable glare.

—On the other hand, Subaru had just suffered the embarrassment of letting Beatrice see his seasickness and wanted to make up for it by appearing reliable.

Subaru: “Ha ha. You correctly decided that this place is like a labyrinth, but you were wrong to think that it was a perfect maze and to use the left hand rule. I have some less flawed, no, flawless tactics.”

Beatrice: “Ho ho, you’re pretty confident, I suppose. Go ahead and tell me your plan, in fact.”

Subaru: “Hee, I’ll tell you. Its name is the Caged Method.” 罫いしの¼か誦いる罫

Beatrice: “——?”

Beatrice tilted her head, a question mark floating above it. The name didn’t convey the actual content of his plan, so Subaru cleared his throat and started to explain thoroughly.

Subaru: “Okay. First of all, we’ll call our current position the starting point. If we proceed, we’ll eventually come to a fork. We’ll continue until we hit a dead end. Then, we’ll go back to our first fork.”

Beatrice: “...mm, continue, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Then, we’ll map that branch and choose another one. Using the

same method as the first branch, we'll walk until we hit a dead end. Eventually, we'll have every branch and every path of the dungeon mapped out."

Beatrice: "That would take far too long, in fact! I wonder if we would even arrive before nightfall, I suppose!"

Subaru: "I-Idiot! What's wrong with taking the certain path!? How many people do you think safely survived a dungeon with this method? I'm doing just as you said, relying on the wisdom of history!"

Beatrice: "Losing sight of your goal by relying on wisdom is a bad habit, in fact!"

Certainly, it hurt that Beatrice trampled on his idea, but even Subaru had to admit his plan had too many faults. It was a time consuming tactic, and besides, they had no pen or paper with which to draw a map.

Subaru: "Then there's only one other method..."

Beatrice: "What is it, in fact? Betty's trust in you is significantly lower now, I suppose."

Although this method was reliable, it wasn't going to improve Subaru's image. Acting in good faith doesn't make you reliable.

Subaru: "Okay, we'll have to work together here." Beatrice: "On what?"

Subaru: "Let's humbly ask for directions." Beatrice: "That's fine, in fact..."

Subaru had accepted that he couldn't solve the problem on his own. He thought Beatrice's pride would be the only problem, but she seemed okay with it as well. Fortunately, Kiritaka Muse was both a famous merchant and heavily involved in urban planning. Everyone would know where his office was. With that in mind, Subaru looked around, hoping to find someone to ask. But,

Subaru: "Even though this is a park, there's nobody here."

Beatrice: “The timing is bad, in fact. It’s late afternoon, the perfect time for naps, I suppose.”

Subaru definitely agreed with Beatrice and the temptation to nap in the shade rose. He decided to head back to the direction of the main canal, where there were more people, when,

Subaru: “—Do you hear something?”

The faint sound of wind and water. No, it was the sound of a singing human voice?

“—”

Subaru could hear it only intermittently, but he was drawn toward it, looking for the source. Beside him, Beatrice also seemed to be moving toward the sound.

Upon arriving at the scene, they stood, overwhelmed, forgetting to even breathe.

—A lone girl stood in front of a monument at the back of the park, her voice raised in song.

She was a small girl with dark skin, large round eyes, and a vibrant face. Her crisp yellow twintails were decorated with small, strange ornaments. In her hands, she held an instrument between the size of a guitar and an ukulele. She played and sang simultaneously.

The energy contained in the song could only be described as overwhelming.

Subaru, listening to her sing, felt a nonexistent squall by his face and a nonexistent earthquake under his feet. The clarity, the volume, of her song was overwhelming. Her voice, singing a balladic tune, was the only sound in existence.

“——”

That lone girl, using only her voice and fingertips, created an energy comparable to that of an orchestra.

Subaru was far from the only one who had been utterly captivated by her. There was an audience of around twenty people, all holding their breaths, completely unaware of Subaru. Likewise, Subaru had only noticed the singing girl, whose presence entirely dominated the space.

As Subaru’s entire body trembled, the girl’s song came to its climax and the audience’s enthusiasm came to its peak—

Girl: “—Without money, without a future, without hope, with only vanity. What can I see but the darkness? And beyond that darkness, nothing. The end, the end, the end is approach—”

Subaru: “How is this song so exciting even after calming down, Oi?!”

Girl: “Huh!?”

The song which even dreams couldn’t create was unexpectedly interrupted by Subaru.

As soon as he had surprised her, the girl had stopped singing and dropped her instruments. Of course, the music had also stopped. —Immediately, the intense atmosphere surrounding the girl vanished. Subaru realized that he had messed up.

Subaru: “Oh no, I didn’t read the mood. Sorry, I didn’t mean—that hurts! —hk! —ow! —eh!?”

Beatrice: “Subaru you idiot, it’s ruined, in fact. What a waste of a rare and lovely mood, in fact. You just had to thoughtlessly ruin it, I suppose. You’ve gone too far, in fact.”

Before he could apologize, a sharp pain pierced his toes. Looking down, he saw and indignant Beatrice stomping on his foot with her heel. Beatrice seemed to return to reality when the song was interrupted, and considered that interruption unforgivable. Then,

“Oh... what was that song?” “This is a park ... just a little a while ago, I was in the darkness.” “No, I couldn’t help it at the time, but...”

The audience who had been swallowed by the song slowly tumbled back into the reality. Everyone turned to the criminal who had ruined the song. That was Natsuki Subaru—a man who had a reputation for failing to read the mood.

“—Don’t do thoughtless things!”

Everyone loudly and angrily cursed Subaru.

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Beatrice: “Thank you everyone, I suppose. Actually, I enjoyed it.”

Subaru: “Don’t sound so happy. Take a look at my feet, are they still the same size? Are my feet okay?”

Beatrice: “I wouldn’t care, in fact. For now, don’t consider Betty your companion, I suppose.”

Beatrice turned her face away and stubbornly denied Subaru, so he checked on his own. His right foot had almost doubled in size.

Subaru had poured water on the concert, so their reaction wasn’t entirely unexpected.

One by one, the audience had thanked the girl who sang and shook hands with her, and about half of them had stepped on Subaru’s foot before leaving. Subaru had been unable to say anything, and Beatrice had tolerated it, leaving Subaru a public enemy. Subaru prepared himself for both external and internal bleeding in his feet.

Subaru: “Don’t you think you should let me rely on your healing magic?”

Beatrice: “It would be a waste of my slowly accumulating mana, in fact. Wait for it to heal naturally, or ask Emilia, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You and Emilia’ve been taking care of me for a long time, huh.”

Since he’d come to this world, he’d sustained a steadily increasing amount of injuries, but they rarely lasted. Even injuries from his daily parkour, such as bruises, abrasions, and sprains, would be promptly healed by Emilia or Beatrice. His fear of pain hadn’t diminished, but there was a relief in knowing that his injuries all had a cure.

Subaru: “Well, I’ll just treat the pain as a lesson this time.”

That said, Subaru caressed Beatrice's head, who was still turned away. Beatrice gave him her gentle hands.

Beatrice: "Well... well, I suppose it's fine, in fact. As long as you reflect on it and learn your lesson, I suppose."

Subaru: "Yep, I'll do just that. Sorry, I was wrong..."

Subaru and Beatrice finished their talk, and turned to the girl. Because he'd been troublesome for her, Subaru would try to apologize. The girl, who had been watching the entire time, said,

Girl: "An inspiration!" Subaru: "Eh?"

Girl: "Listen. —I don't know the difference between our years."

Leaving a staggering Subaru behind, the girl strings her the instrument and instantly finds a rhythm. She timed herself, breathed in a small breath, and started to sing.

Girl: "My love, do you see it, do you feel it? The difference between our ages. Even though our surroundings may change, I wouldn't care one bit. All I care about is our height difference. Wait, my love. Please wait a moment. A little bit, a little bit, just a little bit more. If I stand on the tips of my toes, I can reach you. If the two of us stay so close together, the difference in our ages is irrelevant. So please, only two years, please wait that long. The distance between our love is sweetly melting away."

Subaru: "As the distance in our love shrinks, it turns into a quiet, burning love. Eventually, two cranes will deliver to us two children, and our future will be a bright love story."

Beatrice: “Eeeehhhhh!?”

At the end of the girl’s song, Subaru suddenly joined in with a rap. Beatrice raised her voice with astonishment, demanding an explanation.

Beatrice: “Wait a minute! Why... why is Subaru suddenly part of the song, I suppose? Why did you just accept his addition, in fact?”

Subaru: “Oioi, what are you talking about, Beako... does the song cross a line?”

Liliana: “Well said, Liliana’s heart is trembling with excitement!”

Beatrice: “Y-Your attitude that Betty is the wrong is unacceptable, I suppose...”

Subaru, feeling bad for Beatrice who had no one on her side, turned to the dark skinned girl.

Subaru: “Let me mention that Beako and I aren’t in the kind of relationship that you’re thinking of. Even if she grew two more years, she still wouldn’t be in my target range.”

Liliana: “Eh? She’ll only be thirteen or fourteen by then? Despite how I look, I’m good at guessing ages. Well, I guess this is a skill gained from life experience.”

Subaru: “She’ll be roughly 402 years old.”

Liliana: “Oh please. There’s no need to be this stubborn just because I hit the mark.”

She dismissed Subaru’s words as an excuse and ignored them. Subaru also

thought that correcting her would lead to too much trouble. Anyway, the topic had changed too much.

Subaru: “Back to the original topic, was the inspiration you mentioned earlier the song?”

Liliana: “Yeah, that’s right. Despite how I may look, I’m easily moved. Once I saw your interactions, I felt like I needed to immortalize them in song. Be proud!”

The girl, speaking quickly and fluently, raised her hands or her mouth.

Liliana: “Ah, but, what I did wasn’t enough. Big brother helped by adding the bit at the end. That was the first time I’d gotten such a reaction, I was very happy.”

Subaru: “That was because the god of rap blessed me, I certainly couldn’t do it again. I don’t have the skill or experience.”

Liliana: “—One single, shining moment...”

Seeing the mutual understanding without words between the two drained the patience of the little girl who had been left out.

Beatrice: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Mm, what is it... Beako!?”

Beatrice yanked his sleeve down and shockwaves sent Subaru flying. The momentum wouldn’t kill him, but he still bounced all over the lawn of the park.

—Meanwhile, Beatrice turned to the dark skinned girl.

Beatrice: "It's no good for you to take inspiration from us anymore, in fact. Betty is putting an end to it, I suppose. If you resist you'll end up like him, in fact."

Liliana: "Ha...a...a, um, do..."

Beatrice: "Be quiet, I suppose. Only think about promptly responding to Betty, in fact. The reason nothing is happening to you right now is because your song was lovely, I suppose. But who knows how long this mercy will last, in fact."

Even seeing her trembling, Beatrice's voice held no mercy. Seeing her hurried nod, Beatrice sighed. The girl was too scared to form words. Then,

Beatrice: "Muse Company, take Betty to where Kiritaka Muse is, I suppose."

Liliana: "—Eh?"

Beatrice: "I'll not say it again, in fact. Lead the way or be subjected to Betty's anger, I suppose." Liliana: "I-I'll lead you there! I will!"

When pressed with the choice, the girl instantly raised her white flag. Beatrice nodded, satisfied, as Subaru walked back toward them.

Beatrice: "Tell me if you have any complaints, in fact."

Subaru: "Is it acceptable to use your mana like this for educational purposes?"

Beatrice: "It depends on the time and place, I suppose."

Subaru: "What a kind consideration, Beako. Was it okay to threaten someone to guide us?"

Subaru scratched his face and looked down. Beatrice looked at him with a sullen gaze. Subaru continued,

Subaru: "That child is probably the famous songstress who knows Kiritaka. Maybe we shouldn't make a bad impression on her."

She'd mentioned that her name was Liliana earlier, and there was no mistaking that singing ability, even if her personality wasn't what he had imagined.

Liliana: "I'll do anything you want me to. E-Eh, whether it be guiding you or licking your shoes... all I humbly ask... is that you spare my life..."

There was a girl on the ground desperately begging for her life. Correction, that girl was the songstress Liliana.

Although, looking at her, no trace of the graceful Songstress could be seen.

Chapter 9: The Value of A Songstress

Liliana: “Then, let me introduce myself once again. Although I’m no longer a travelling minstrel, I’m still a free spirited bard who goes wherever the wind blows me. My name is Liliana, please continue to advise me in the future—hk”

Beatrice: “You bit yourself, in fact.”

One hand holding her instrument gracefully, Liliana smiled as blood flowed freely from her mouth. Beatrice gently wiped it away for her. It seemed her tongue had been wounded rather seriously.

Beatrice: “It’s rude to bite your tongue like that.”

Subaru: “Have you heard of—Ah, are you the famous Songstress? I know you introduced yourself with her name, but it’s probably kinda rare to just meet her on the street.”

Liliana: “Ah, um, I’m not fond of that title since I’m only a fledgling musician. It sounds so sophisticated. I’m so far from reaching my peak that if people thought I called myself the Songstress they’d say I’m too conceited.”

Wiping at the bloodied lower half of her face, Liliana’s expression seemed almost coy, leading Subaru to hesitate over his interrogation of her. He decided that rather than interrogate, he’d try to casually converse with her. Even so, considering the words she’d just said, she seemed to have a very high sense of professionalism.

Subaru: “Although I can see where you’re coming from, I think you can accept some praise. That being said, I also sort of admire your attitude about it.”

Liliana: “No, no, it’s nothing so grand. Focusing on getting through each day is fine. So, please.” Subaru: “——?”

Liliana stretched out a hand to a confused Subaru. Since it was empty, Subaru had no idea what she wanted and tilted his head at her smiling face.

Liliana: “Now that you’ve heard the voice of the Songstress, please give me something in return. Did you think listening was free? If so then your attitude troubles me.”

Subaru: “Then give me back the emotions you made me feel! And take back your song!”

Liliana: “What are you saying!? How do you think a bard makes a living!? Are you saying I should be giving out feelings for free!? I don’t think so!”

Liliana stomped angrily on the ground. What she said wasn’t wrong, but Subaru’s impression of the Songstress had been significantly lowered. Judging from how cold Beatrice’s large eyes were, he assumed she felt something similar.

Subaru: “Alright. Let’s discuss a tip. How much do you want?”

Liliana: “No, no, the tip should be for the customer to decide based on what his heart feels. Although the more the better.”

Subaru: “For crying out loud.”

Taking advantage of Liliana’s laughing, which showed her bloodstained teeth, Subaru pinched her chin with his cold hands.

Her face was small so it was incredibly easy to pinch, and Liliana had to run several laps around Subaru before he let her go. Stepping away dizzily, she muttered “it was just a joke” over and over to herself.

Liliana: “If you’re looking for the Chamber of Commerce, aren’t you Kiritaka-san’s guests? I wonder if you should be acting this way.”

Subaru: “You know, I don’t know you very well but my impression is only

getting worse. I think it's about time we got going."

The more he talked to Liliana, the closer Subaru came to reaching the limits of his patience.

When they'd found out they were lost, they were very close to being late, and if they delayed any longer they would very likely miss a critical negotiation. After negotiations there would be more challenges and Subaru didn't want to lose face by missing the critical first step.

Shaking her head, and her hair with it, Liliana ceremoniously announced "I understand" and began to lead the way.

Liliana: "So why does the honored guest want to see Kiritaka-san?"

Beatrice: "You don't understand your position here, I suppose. Stop nosing into matters that you are unrelated to and quietly take us to our destination, in fact."

Liliana: "Eep!"

Faced with Beatrice's intimidating tone, Liliana gave a cry resembling that of a small bird's. Subaru pulled on one of Beatrice's spiraled twintails.

Subaru: "You don't have to be so fierce. Then again, we can't reveal everything, so a simple, clear explanation would be difficult to make."

Liliana: "But, I'm Kiritaka-san's confidant. Isn't it just a matter of time before I find out?"

Subaru: "Well, if it's really only a matter of time, then there should be no harm in me taking precautions."

Liliana: “If you say so... you’re not a person with very good character, huh.”

Subaru: “You’re pretty straightforward, aren’t you. If you didn’t have talent for singing then you’d be in serious trouble.”

—There’s a saying that geniuses were often strange people and Liliana was probably an example. Singing came easily to her but her social graces were lacking.

Liliana: “But really, I am a little worried. I’ve been out for a long time, so I’ll probably be scolded when I get back.”

Subaru: “When we’re discussing negotiations, please take care not to speak up. Alright?” Liliana: “I got it.”

Subaru: “Huh, really?! That was unexpected.”

Seeing Beatrice and Subaru’s satisfied expressions, for some reason, Liliana puffed out her cheeks in a pout. She raised the instrument in her hands, and began to play.

Liliana: “Inspiration just hit me. — —Big Waves, Large Waves, Waves of the World!” Subaru: “No thanks, we’re good.”

Before the solo could start, Subaru hurriedly snatched Liliana’s instrument out of her hands. Liliana made an “ahh” sound and she stretched to reach it, but her tiny body couldn’t reach Subaru’s hands.

Subaru: “It’s not a human hostage, it’s a musical instrument. If you lead us to the Chamber of Commerce, I’ll give it back to you.”

Liliana: “You’re terrible! Evil! Barbaric! Depraved!” Subaru: “Hahaha, is that so!”

Having just been denounced as the world’s most wicked person, Subaru plucked a string on the instrument. The sound it made was similar to that of an

acoustic guitar.

Subaru, who had a lot of free time at home, practiced until he'd become fairly skilled. He could play and sing to an 80's folk song without much difficulty. If he introduced that music here, maybe it would take off and the music industry would be revolutionized.

Subaru: "Well, maybe it'll be like it was with mayonnaise."

Even though he hadn't considered the implementation of the plan at all, the idea had taken root. In original world, finding an application for a good idea was often taken for granted. In fact, Subaru had no idea how to begin with it, just like he had no idea how to mass produce and market mayonnaise.

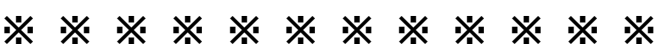
Subaru: "Playing guitar and telling stories to village kids are both within my skill range. Listen."

Liliana: "Wait, wait, please stop! I can't let a layman play my instrument! If you break it, I can't make a living anymore... huh!? You're pretty good! And I've never heard the song before! Eh, what is this?!"

As he walked, Subaru surprised Liliana with his folk songs. Like this, they began the walk to the Chamber of Commerce.

Beatrice: "Good grief, I suppose..."

An exhausted Beatrice trailed after the two, setting her pace to Subaru's melody.



The door of to the Muse Chamber of Commerce was not particular from the buildings surrounding it. 1st Street and 2nd Street separate the residents of Pristella from tourists and the Chamber of Commerce was located directly between the two.

This position was meant to indicate the power of the owner of this building. It was both the innermost and the outermost building, highlighting its uniqueness in an almost exaggerated way.

Liliana: "This is it, the long awaited Muse Chamber of Commerce."

Springing over with a dance-like motion, Liliana indicated the building in front of her. Although there were taller buildings surrounding it, the four-story Chamber of Commerce seemed to stand incredibly tall. That said, Subaru felt a little regretful.

Subaru: "I knew it wouldn't look as grand as it had appeared from the entrance of Pristella, but I'm still a little disappointed... it didn't steal my heart the way the Water Plumage Pavilion did."

Liliana: "The Water Plumage Pavilion, that weirdly shaped place on 1st Street? If you use that as your basis, even Kiritaka-san will look kind of poor. But, that aside..."

Liliana swung her body up and down in exaggerated motions and reached out the palms of her hands.

Liliana: "Weeell, now that I've fulfilled our agreement, can you give my lovely instrument back to me? If I don't have it back by tomorrow then I'm not sure how I'll survive."

Subaru: "Ah, right, right. Here you go."

Subaru had become tired of singing and playing the back-scratcher-shaped instrument halfway to their destination. Liliana hurriedly took it from him, breathing as if in a panic, and checked it for scratches, then began to rub her face against it and gave it a kiss.

Liliana: “Ahhhh, it’s good to have you back. I’ll never let you go again!”

Subaru: “It’s impressive that your attitude can annoy me this much. I think this is the most annoyed I’ve been at someone’s attitude since Petelgeuse.”

Liliana: “Hooo, I don’t know who he is, but he sounds similar to me. Tell me about him! If I ever meet this Petelgeuse-san one day, I can’t promise he wouldn’t be my enemy!”

Subaru: “He’s a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.”

Liliana: “Here he goes again! Stop being such a kidder! That should be your new name!”

Liliana showered Subaru with an overreaction, but tilted her head at his cold response, and gradually began to assume a serious expression.

Liliana: “Wait, were you serious?”

Subaru: “Exactly. You probably won’t have many other opportunities to compare yourself to someone who’s dead and gone, so make what you will of it.”

Liliana: “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a minute!”

At Subaru’s words, Liliana objected with amazing momentum. Her reaction surprised Subaru, who wondered if she was angry at being compared to a Sin Archbishop. Her next words threw Subaru off even more. They were,

Liliana: “What you said just now, why did it sound like you met a Sin Archbishop?” Subaru: “...and if I did?”

He didn’t know what she’d meant to ask, but it was definitely something important. He hadn’t expected such a reaction after telling her Petelgeuse’s identity as an Archbishop. Although, it wasn’t impossible that she encountered the poisonous, insect-like Witch Cult before, since they seemed to appear everywhere.

Subaru stiffened up, alert, and Beatrice also paid close attention to the situation, ready to act immediately if need be. One slow reaction, and it would be too late for them.

An oppressive feeling atmosphere,

With two people looking to see how she would react, Liliana spoke. She said,

Liliana: “Are you perhaps the... Lolimancer, Natsuki Subaru-sama?” (幼女使い “Little Girl User”)

Subaru: “Ugh.”

Beatrice: “Ugh, I suppose.”

Under Liliana’s shining gaze, Subaru and Beatrice replied at the same time.

Subaru’s official title was Emilia’s knight, but that was the one he was known by the least. People often called him the witch’s knight, one of the many enigmatic characters she was surrounded with.

—The knight of the half elf is a mysterious person who always has a little girl with him.

Liliana: “You were indispensable in slaying one of the Three Great Witchbeasts, the White Whale, alongside Duchess Crusch Karsten, with the Sword Demon Wilhelm calling you his benefactor! And then with help from the famous businesswoman Anastasia-san and the Duchess Crusch, you defeated the Witch Cult’s Archbishop of Sloth! And there are unconfirmed rumors that you are also the hero who defeated the Sizable Hare, which has been plaguing the world for four hundred years!”

Subaru: “Itchy, itchy, itchy, itchy, itchy!”

Liliana: “What a terrifying reputation!”

Liliana, with two hands raised, wore the expression of a girl who’d found her dreams as she listed Subaru’s merits. Some were accurate, and a few were exaggerated, but he could find no real error in her list.

Even so, her words embarrassed him enough for his entire body to itch, while Beatrice wore a seemingly dissatisfied but happy expression.

Liliana: “And the one who has a little girl who is legendarily skilled in magic following him loyally, you’re that Subaru-sama! Aren’t you?!”

Beatrice: “Haha. Betty’s Subaru will surpass even the most outstanding figures in history, in fact. He will become the brightest star known to man, I suppose! You should respect him more, in fact!”

Subaru: “H-Hey!”

Beatrice, sticking her nose out proudly, and Liliana, bowing down. The two caused more headaches than any troublemaker, and it seemed like their show at the entrance of the Chamber of Commerce had attracted attention of the staff there. Upon seeing them and finding the kneeling Liliana, they promptly all returned to their work.

Subaru: “You, do you always act so exaggeratedly? Everyone here has a strange ‘oh, it’s Liliana, as always’ type expression on their face!”

Liliana: “Ah, please stop. Seeing a legend in front of me, my heart is racing! I’m glad to have a chance to witness you in person. Hehe.”

Subaru’s previous unease had all but disappeared, but Liliana grew more and more frantic, saliva even dripping from her mouth.

Liliana: “Well, could—could the people you’re meeting with in the Chamber of Commerce really be who I’m thinking of!?”

Subaru: “...who are you thinking of?”

Liliana: “No, it’s just that I’ve made a lot of songs based on the famous Emilia-tan. I know she’s a real person, but in my mind she’s always been a fictional character! If it’s who I think it is, it’s Emilia-tan! Oh, hehe!”

Disregarding Subaru completely, Liliana flew into the Chamber of Commerce. After falling still for one shocked moment, a dumbfounded Subaru could only chase her into the building.

Beatrice: “Subaru! That girl, she even dropped her instrument, in fact!”

Subaru: “Should she really be treating her lifeline like this!?”

Hurriedly grabbing the lute-lyre from Beatrice, Subaru ran into Chamber of Commerce. Seeing the reception staff gawking at the upper floor, he deduced that Liliana had just run up the stairs.

Receptionist: “Y-You are...?”

Subaru: “We’re with Emilia-sama, who should be with Kiritaka-san right now. They told you we would be late, right?”

Receptionist: “Yes, they’re there right now... but Liliana-sama...” Subaru: “I know the way, can I go up?”

Seeing the receptionist’s stiff nod, Subaru hurried after Liliana. There was no real reason to be in a rush, but the thought of Liliana and Emilia meeting face to face made him uneasy. Or, rather, perhaps it would be better to say that their meeting could bring about a troublesome atmosphere.

Even more frightening was that Liliana’s exceedingly strange personality would clash with Emilia’s, and Emilia’s experience and skill in interaction were overwhelmingly inadequate.

Beatrice: “Liliana was acting strange, I wonder if she will stay like that!”

Subaru: “I really don’t want to think about what will happen if we don’t stop her.”

Registering Beatrice’s words, Subaru sped to the third floor. Although he hadn’t caught her, he’d saw the back of Liliana’s clothing. Now he just had to aim for his goal! Time to show off his parkour skills!

Subaru: “Come on!”

Flying up the stairs, Subaru began to skip steps entirely, using his hand to do an elegant horizontal rotation, drawing ever closer to Liliana, before finally catching her in front of a room near the staircase.

Subaru: “Liliana, WAIT!” Liliana: “Waah!?”

Liliana, who was still salivating, yelled in surprise as Subaru reeled back, gasping for breath. Liliana: “Oh, you caught up, but I’m not quitting so easily. I’m not giving up!”

Subaru: “If you want to meet Emilia no matter what, I’ll ask her for a private meeting, but

she's in the middle of a very important meeting right now."

Liliana: "Uh... well. I guess I got a little carried away."

Hearing Subaru's serious tone seemed to cool Liliana off a little. She relaxed her shoulders, and Subaru shook his head and handed her the instrument.

Liliana: "Ah, thanks."

Subaru: "The tool you make a living off of is incredibly important. Don't just throw it away and run. It wouldn't have been surprising if the instrument used by the Songstress had been taken and pawned off."

Liliana: "Don't worry, Kiritaka-san gave it to me. He likes to shop around."

Subaru: "Your sponsor is really not ordinary!"

Speaking to Subaru with a bitter smile, Liliana held her cherished instrument to her chest. Her expression was one of sincerity and disbelief at being able to abandon it so easily. Since she'd thrown it down for her ambition earlier, Subaru didn't know if he could believe her smile.

Liliana: "Well, I'm fine with saving my meeting with Emilia-sama until later... but first, can I discuss something with Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "Drop that bothersome honorific! Well, what do you want to talk about?"

Liliana: "There's so much! I want to know how accurate the stories are. Not just so I can hear them but so I can sing about them, too. I can write so many songs from that inspiration, maybe even a heroic one that will be passed down for generations! Just thinking about it makes my heart race!"

Holding out her clenched hand, Liliana's eyes shone with energy.

While this puzzling scene was happening, Beatrice finally caught up and stumbled upon Subaru and Liliana's proximity.

Beatrice: “Ah, you, strange girl. Don’t stand so close to Subaru, in fact. Move away, I suppose.”

Liliana: “Don’t worry, it’s not that big of a deal. Speaking of which, I also have some questions for the young girl who follows Lolimancer-san!”

Beatrice: “Betty is not a young girl, I suppose! She is a proper lady, in fact!”

Subaru: “You two are so rude, always arguing like that! Shush! Emilia-tan is doing negotiations inside...”

Beatrice, who was in an awful mood, and Liliana, who didn’t realize that she was the cause. Subaru was caught in the middle of their argument, and, in his frustration, inadvertently raised his voice. And, at that moment,

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

The door opened unexpectedly and Subaru’s name was called from the inside.

Looking through the open door, Subaru saw what looked like a reception room, where everyone was sitting on a long backed chair, looking at him with surprised expressions.

Emilia, Otto and Garfiel. Sitting opposite of them was a lean statured young man who was wearing fine-looking clothes. The one who had opened the door was a middle-aged man who was probably with him.

Subaru: “A-ah... Emilia-tan. What a coincidence.”

Emilia: “A coincidence? Why were you being so loud.... Uh, Kiritaka-san?”

Seeing Subaru making an embarrassed gesture, Emilia wore a look of

confusion as she turned to the young man sitting opposite of her, who stood and grabbed something from the table. Then he turned where Subaru was standing.

Kiritaka: “Do-, do, do, do, do, DON’T TOUCH MY LILIANA!!”

Suddenly raising his voice, the young man hurled a glowing blue piece of magic ore.

Concentrated pure energy exploded in front of Subaru, whose vision was momentarily engulfed in blue. Seeing it, he faintly registered a thought of “wow, how beautiful,” before the impact swallowed him.

—Like that, the first day of formal negotiations broke down.

Chapter 10: The Way to the City of Water

Negotiations between Emilia and Kiritaka Muse had proceeded unexpectedly smoothly.

Kiritaka, as a businessman, had likely been trying not to show favor to a single royal election candidate. However, Emilia had approached him directly, meaning that this meeting was a rather major event for him.

Of course, Emilia, who was taking casual sips of the complimentary tea, had not been thinking of her actions in such a way. Garfiel, who was growly steadily addicted to the accompanying desserts, had also not been considering the political ramifications of their actions.

It could be said that, in the reception room of Muse Company, the only one who could read Kiritaka was Otto.

Kiritaka: "I understand that you have come a long way. Please excuse me for being unable to meet you at your convenience. Although I understand that it is disrespectful, due to my position, it is unwise for me to travel freely... in addition, I have become quite attached to this place."

Otto: "Not at all, that's a very reasonable way to think. We're the ones who should be sorry for intruding in your busy schedule."

Kiritaka: "I will treat whatever you need from me with the utmost priority and care."

While exchanging polite greetings, Otto scrutinized the man facing him. The famed Kiritaka Muse was well known even beyond Pristella. His behavior revealed a majestic and stylish image.

He was still fairly young, probably somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. His tall, thin body was clad in finely made clothes, and his pale golden hair was meticulously combed to the back of his head. His rather uncomfortable looking ornaments showed fine taste, and his introverted and concise nature revealed that he was probably highly educated.

Otto, as Emilia Camp's Head of Internal Affairs, alongside Roswaal, had unknowingly accumulated a rather impressive amount of experience in negotiations. So he immediately judged Kiritaka's attitude to be almost unmatchable.

Speaking frankly, Emilia was incredibly fortunate to have Otto with her.

If Otto had let Emilia face Kiritaka alone, she would surely be swayed by his skilled rhetoric, and would have ended up overspending on expensive but ultimately useless things.

From the past year, this was the impression Otto had drawn of Emilia.

Kiritaka: "May I inquire as to what you need from me? According to Anastasia-san's messenger, what you want is stocked by our company."

Otto: "It may be too soon to say so. Actually..."

Interrupting Kiritaka, who had begun to address the main topic, Otto looked to Emilia.

Emilia was content to leave the negotiations to Otto. Garfiel, similarly, maintained his usual attitude, eating desserts while fixing a sharp gaze on one corner of the room, staring at a leisurely looking figure who was dressed from head to toe in white.

In Kiritaka's words, the man in white was present to protect the staff from excessively assertive visitors. 'Recently, the world has not been in a peaceful state, so I hope that he can join us.'

Otto knew of the man in white.

It was said that Pristella's Muse Company had a mercenary force known as the Scales of the White Dragon, a group which was well-known even in Lugunica. This man was probably one of its members.

Rumors claimed that their group was one that operated locally, but, a few years ago, they formed close ties with Muse Company. If those rumors were true, then Kiritaka was the one who had formed an allegiance with them.

Otto: "We have a special request. That is, we are looking for a rare type of stone, even by Muse Company's standards. We are searching for colorless magic ore with outstanding purity. I hope that this is something we can buy from you."

Keeping in mind his evaluation that Kiritaka was not someone he could afford to be careless around, Otto stated his request. Playing around with vague terms would be meaningless. After all, Kiritaka had more than likely seen through the true reason for their visit as soon as it had been prepared.

Kiritaka: "I see. We do indeed stock magic ore... and we do indeed have some magic ore with a higher grade of quality than those stocked by regular merchants. Emilia-sama, no matter how much colorless ore you want, we are also willing to prepare..."

Otto: "Kiritaka-san. Please be straightforward with us. We have made our request; colorless magic ore of the highest purity. That is all we need."

Kiritaka: "...this is rather discourteous."

Kiritaka was not simply lacking in straightforwardness. He was merely using a

negotiation technique. Despite perfectly understanding Otto's intentions, he casually dropped the names of other goods that he believed would appeal to Emilia. To him, the goods had been marked as sold long before the negotiation had even started. The only remaining question was the matter of the price.

Otto: "We are indeed requesting something that may be troublesome for you, so to satisfy the price, we have prepared something that you will find beneficial. Mining rights to magic ore in Elier Forest, part of the Mathers territory which is supporting Emilia-sama."

Kiritaka: "Please do not turn this into the kind of fraud that muddles prices. We are the only formal company that trades raw magical ore, so we cannot consider this proposal. In our line of work, credit is everything to us. I'm sure you would understand, Otto-sama?"

Otto gave a silent sigh. It seemed that Kiritaka knew of his origins.

The Suwen family's business was nowhere nearly as famous as the Muse family's, but it was hardly unknown. The main players supporting each of the candidates were sure to be heavily investigated along with the candidates themselves.

That said, many questions were left unanswered by these investigations, such as Emilia's own origins. Her mysterious background did not win her too many favors.

Garfiel had lived in Sanctuary his whole life, and Emilia had spent a century frozen in Elier Forest. Both the Lolimancer and his contract spirit were of unknown origin.

Thus, Otto, whose identity had easily been discovered, would certainly have it used against him frequently.

Kiritaka: "Otto-sama? Your complexion seems to have changed. Are you

okay?”

Otto: “Of course, please don’t worry about me. I just thought of something disconcerting and it made me a little uncomfortable, that’s all.”

Shaking his head at Kiritaka’s words, Otto decided to save that unproductive line of thought for later. Once again, he urged that Kiritaka provide a straight answer to his question. Kiritaka took on a meditative attitude.

Kiritaka: “Of course, we won’t refuse to let go of our commodities no matter how much you plead, and of course we are going to follow Emilia-sama’s request.”

Otto: “Then...”

Kiritaka: “However, the magical ore you are requesting is special. In truth, on the occasion when I was first sent to Muse Company in Pristella, the president—that is, my father—gave it to me as a gift. Rather than treating it as a commodity, I prefer to think of its sentimental value.”

Otto: “——”

Regardless of whether the story was true or false, Kiritaka had made a cunning move. Hearing Kiritaka’s words, Otto bit his lip.

As Kiritaka had said, the extremely rare magic ore they were requesting was more than a mere trading commodity. Taking into account the magnitude of Muse Company’s transactions, this was too good of an opportunity not to seek an extra profit.

So how could the additional value be compensated? Not with commodities, but with sentiment. Since the ore was important that meant it needed to be exchanged for something important.

Emilia: “I see... I didn’t realize it was something so important to you.”

Emilia’s expression reflected that Kiritaka’s story seemed to have touched her deeply. Otto could only conclude that Kiritaka wasn’t cut out to be an actor, considering how guilty he looked.

It takes both action and effort to get your desired result. Otto thought this to himself as he cleared his throat.

Otto: “I appreciate your kindness. Even so, we still hope to find what we came here for.”

Kiritaka: “I understand. I am a merchant who sells magical ore, and I know that it is better to have it shine in the hands of someone who needs it than to have it sit as a decoration at my home. I am willing to give it to you. There are only a few conditions.”

Otto: “—Conditions. Let me hear them.”

Having established that there would be an additional price tag, Kiritaka commenced the real negotiation. After Otto agreed to hear them, Kiritaka held up three fingers.

What unreasonable conditions would there be? Even thinking about them gave Otto a light stomach pain.

Kiritaka: “First of all. Muse Company knew that Emilia-sama was seeking this very magical stone. However, in order to keep it out of the hands of malicious people, we have hidden our possession of it. I hope you understand this.”

Otto: "...that is only natural. That you tell us this without attempting to hide anything removes all of my suspicion."

At first, Kiritaka had denied any past knowledge of the affairs of Emilia Camp. But in order to bring this deal to a successful conclusion, he gave up this knowledge.

Kiritaka: "Then the second one. After the deal has been signed on the line, I want to inform Hoshin Company of our transaction and confirm its legitimacy."

Otto: "I understand... that is no problem."

It seemed there was also a deal between Muse Company and Hoshin Company. It seemed to be intended to semi-publically reveal that Emilia owed Anastasia a debt.

Although it was slightly uncomfortable, it was a legitimate request, so Otto could not refuse.

So far, none of the requests would be considered deal-breakers. So, the third request—as soon as he said it, Kiritaka's true intentions would become clear.

Otto held back a sigh as Kiritaka waved the third finger in front of him.

Kiritaka: "Third. —Avoid all contact with the Songstress named Liliana who is currently residing in this city."

Otto: "—Huh?"

Hearing a name suddenly appear of nowhere, Otto froze.

Of course, Emilia and Garfiel, who were accompanying him, had the same

reaction—no, nevermind, those two had remained unchanged since the negotiations started. Emilia sipped her tea and Garfiel stared at the figure in white. Although they had left all the negotiations to Otto, seeing their blatant lack of participation irked him.

Otto: “I’m sorry, but I think I may have misheard you. Did you just say to avoid contact with the Songstress...?”

Kiritaka: “No, there was no misunderstanding there. These conditions are all we ask. If you have any questions, please ask them, and please consider the deal carefully...”

Otto: “If you don’t mind, can I ask for the reason? At this point, I can’t recall our deal having anything to do with the Songstress.”

Kiritaka: “...it’s not something that necessarily needs to be said. Can you agree to that promise?”

His tone sinking, for the first time Kiritaka exposed his emotional side. Otto, who could not understand the condition, was lost on what to do.

Put simply, the third request passed the horizons of his imagination. Accepting posed no future obstacles to Emilia, although she may regret not being able to meet the Songstress she had discussed with Anastasia, it was hardly important enough to scrap this deal for.

That they had so effortlessly come to an agreement was surprising.

Otto had not dared to expect that negotiations could have gone so smoothly (although Kiritaka could, at this point, still change his mind). Subaru, who’d been lost halfway, would be here soon, and would certainly turn that matter

into something troublesome. Before he arrived, Otto wanted to tie the deal up.

Otto: “Emilia-sama, is this alright with you?”

Emilia: “Mm. I’m a little disappointed, but I guess it can’t be helped.”

Having earned a confirmation from Emilia, Otto agreed to the deal. Kiritaka was satisfied to accept this commitment, and the most stressful part of the negotiation came to an end. Now, they could discuss the actual monetary price, and maybe pick up a few small items.

Kiritaka: “There are a few other quality goods that you may be interested in... would you like to see?”

Kiritaka stood to retrieve a wooden chest from a shelf. The chest, having been placed on the table, emitted a glow as it opened, dazzling Otto and Emilia.

Inside of it were all sorts of magical stones, carefully arranged on cushions, the most radiant of which was the colorless, transparent one.

This was the colorless stone that Emilia had been pursuing. Kiritaka: “Would you like to inspect it?”

She nodded, then stretched her nervous fingers toward the stone. But, at that moment,

Garfiel: “Emilia-sama.”

Man in White: “Young Master.”

Simultaneously, the two guards called to their respective master. They turned to look at each other, and then to face their surprised master.

Garfiel: “Ths’a two loud’n annoyin’ somethin’ comin’.”

Man in White: “There seems to be the sound of footsteps coming from downstairs. Allow me to go investigate.”

He strode soundlessly toward the door as Garfiel tensed his body. The sound of the disturbances drew closer, until they seemed to be right in front of the door—

???: “You two are so rude, always arguing like that! Shush! Emilia-tan is inside, doing serious negotiations...”

The voice was an incredibly familiar one. As this thought was shared by three people in the room, the man in white opened the door of the reception room, revealing a familiar scary face. With a petite girl on either side of him, this man, Subaru, was truly worthy of the title of Lolimancer.

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Hearing Emilia’s call, a pale Subaru finally noticed the presence of everyone else. At that moment, Otto wanted to complain, but he decided to observe everyone else’s reactions first and held back.

And so, Subaru held up his hands and smiled weakly. Subaru: “A-ah... Emilia-tan. What a coincidence.”

Emilia: “A coincidence? Why were you being so loud.... Uh, Kiritaka-san?”
Hearing Emilia’s surprise, Otto’s own reaction was also delayed.

Kiritaka reached a hand into the wooden chest of magic stones and glared at Subaru with a gaze bordering on frantic. He clutched a blue pure magical stone, and,

Kiritaka: “Do-, do, do, do, do, DON’T TOUCH MY LILIANA!!”

Accompanying his frantic cry was a thrown magical stone. Without anyone to stop him, the stone arched toward Subaru and knocked his body away in a blue explosion.

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Man in White: “My apologies for that embarrassing spectacle. The Young Master is usually calm, but if matters involve Liliana-san, he quickly flies into a rage... I will try to calm him down, but, for today, let’s end negotiations here.”

After the commotion died down, the the middle-aged man in white acted as the mediator who had to calm down both sides. He bowed his head with an apology.

Kiritaka’s frantic voice could still be heard from the closed door behind him. That scene was unsuitable for outsiders, so the members of Emilia Camp had been ushered out of the room.

Liliana: “Kiritaka-san is really troublesome, even taking away my chance to speak to Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama! Ugh, I’m so annoyed, ugh!”

Liliana’s anger, on the other hand, was also endless. Speaking in an angry huff, she announced that she’d come up with a new song titled The Avant-Garde Master of Life and Death, causing Beatrice to furrow her brow.

Man in White: “Liliana-chan, please forgive the Young Master.” Liliana: “.....I understand.”

Although it took a long of time to understand, Liliana had finally been talked down. Subaru’s interference had rendered a smooth sailing negotiation utterly fruitless.

Subaru: “In other words, Liliana is a rabid fangirl, and is obsessed with us. Kiritaka knew and wanted to keep us from stealing her. That was the point of the third condition?”

Otto: “And just as I was about to have the deal tied down, Natsuki-san had to come ruin everything. I finally understand now. Does having you around do any good for anyone!?”

Subaru: “I acknowledge that this was my fault, but who would have thought that after getting seasick things would turn out like this... that’s hardly something I had any control over.”

Otto could not hide his dissatisfaction at the result of the negotiations.

Subaru spoke lightly, but he was also hardly satisfied, having taken a blow from Kiritaka’s magical stone, and realizing that negotiations tomorrow would be incredibly difficult based on Kiritaka’s angry tone.

Emilia: “Ora, ora, please don’t be so angry, Otto-kun. Subaru didn’t do this on purpose, these things just happen sometimes.”

Subaru: “That’s right. Keep going, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Subaru, I also have something to say to you. You shouldn’t have been so loud with Liliana-san today. We were the guests there, so we definitely troubled them a lot.”

Subaru: “Yes, I’m sorry.”

Subaru bowed his head in an apology, and Emilia nodded a ‘very good’. Otto gave a helpless sigh as he watched his master’s hopeless attitude.

Otto: “Anyway, today’s negotiations have ended here, so we should be getting back to the Water Plume Pavilion.... however, I have something to attend to first. So, I’ll meet back with everyone later.”

Subaru: “Something to attend to?”

At his unexpected words, everyone turned to Otto, who gestured in the general direction of Muse Company's headquarters.

Otto: "We've gone out of our way to come to the faraway Pristella, so I'd like to take the time to improve relationships here. Although, as for today, it is only necessary for me to go. There may come a day when Emilia-sama may need to come. If that ever happens, I'll have to trouble you, Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "Yeah, I understand. But, why am I not needed today?"

Otto: "If you show up unannounced, they may be unable to sufficiently welcome you. We need to be considerate about where you go."

Emilia: "Yes. I understand. I'll keep it in mind."

After hearing the Emilia's reply, Otto gave a "Please go home promptly", as if speaking to a group of children, then disappeared into the depths of 2nd Street. As for Garfiel, although he wanted to accompany Otto, he was rejected with "Please prioritize Emilia-sama".

Emilia: "So, Subaru, what were you talking about with Liliana-san?"

Subaru: "Oh? Is Emilia-tan concerned about me talking to other girls? I wonder. I'm glad to see this subtle change."

Emilia: "No. Don't worry, I just want to see what kind of a person the Songstress is. It's okay even if you misunderstand, though."

Subaru: "Is it better for me to misunderstand, here!?"

Emilia, as always, naturally and mercilessly cut into Subaru's heart. But, in any case, she gave Subaru a reason to chat with her, so he began to recount his earlier experience.

Subaru: “At first, when we encountered her in the park, I thought her song was super powerful. It was an astounding performance, even as the Songstress. Right, Beako?”

Beatrice: “I won’t deny this point, in fact. I don’t deny it, I suppose. ”

Emilia: “Beatrice looks so distressed, what happened?”

Subaru: “—Talent in one area comes at the price of competence in others. Liliana perfectly showcased the meaning of that.”

Subaru could fully understand Beatrice’s distress. Liliana poured her heart and soul into music, and became a rather pitiful girl.

Subaru: “In short, rather than striving to be an extremely talented person in one area, you should strive to be a mildly successful person all around.”

Garfiel: “Ooh, th’s pretty philosophical, Captain. Sayin’ her singin’d make people think that, mus’ve been amazin’.”

Subaru: “I won’t deny it. Speaking of which, meeting Liliana was worth coming up with that conclusion.”

Everyone decided to return to the inn by foot. If they were to take the waterways again then Subaru would become seasick again which would mean leaving him behind.

Emilia: “Like Otto-kun said, it wasn’t easy for us to come here, so I want to take a walk and appreciate these beautiful streets.”

Rather than having Subaru feel guilty that they were walking for his benefit, Emilia phrased her reasoning as a cute request. Subaru had no complaints, and Garfiel and Beatrice did not object.

Subaru: “If I hadn’t been able to accompany Emilia-tan back to the inn, I would have gone mad with worry.”

Beatrice: “You don’t need to worry, in fact. If we get into trouble then Betty will place her left hand on a wall, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I think I’ve already told you about the defects of that method.”

Garfiel: “Y’two don’t need t’worry, you’ve got my amazin’ self’s nose. Whether’s the smell’f the inn or th’smell’f that midget devil, my amazin’ self remembers it.”

Subaru: “—Heh.”

Noticing that Garfiel used Mimi’s scent as an example, Subaru unconsciously gave a malicious chuckle. The little kitten’s reaction to Garfiel, though surprising and puzzling, was probably nothing other than goodwill. Plus, they were of similar age. Subaru thought they made a rather good match.

Incidentally, Garfiel was still the same, wanting to dedicate himself to Ram. And Ram just regarded Garfiel as a little brother, nothing more.

Subaru: “In any case, Garfiel. You’re my little bro, so as a big brother I’m praying for your success in love.”

Garfiel: “Ahh? Wh’ya j’say some’all touchy-feely, Captain? Well, y’makin’ m’feel sick.”

Subaru wore an expression of ‘I understand’ as he patted Garfiel on the shoulder. Garfiel cocked his head and laughed, exposing his sharp-toothed grin. Subaru hoped from the bottom of his heart that the kind, well-intentioned

Garfiel would find happiness.

Emilia: “This is really a nice city. Everything seems so fresh and the people here look so happy. I can’t help but feel excited.”

Their surroundings seemed to delight Emilia, and, seeing her expression, Subaru felt happy as well. She did have a point, though. The architecture in the city must have taken a great effort to design, and everything functional seemed to serve as artwork. The icing on the cake was, of course, Pristella’s beautiful waterways which doubled as transportation.

Subaru: “Although the city was built like this, the origins of the design are unknown.”

Emilia: “Apparently its construction pushed the limits of technology at the time, because it had something to do with keeping dangerous beasts trapped inside the city. But that doesn’t change its beauty, right?”

Emilia stopped at a bridge overlooking the waterway and smiled.

For whatever reason, Subaru had arrived here, at this point. The results that he’d earned, and the results he was reaching for, as long as they could be reached, nothing else mattered.

Because the most important part of anything was not the beginning, but the end. Subaru: “That’s what you said, Mom.”

Arc 4, Chapter 19:

Naoko: “But if you can smile at the end of all that crying, then everything's okay. What's important isn't the beginning or the middle, it's the end.”

Subaru: “You mean, if the results're good then everything's okay?”

Emilia: “Just now, what did you say?”

Subaru: "I just remembered the magical words that the woman I respect most in the world said to me."

The days of those memories were long gone, but even so, Subaru had gained so much courage from them.

It would be impossible to forget them, because the lesson he'd learned from them was something that could not be forgotten. Natsuki Subaru, today, lived with those memories inside him.

Seeing Subaru and Emilia's shared laughter, Garfiel and Beatrice waited on the side.

Those two were occupied in their own world, and no one could interrupt them. Even Beatrice recognized this point.

Beatrice: "He has such a foolish expression on that face of his, in fact."

Garfiel: "When's a man share'n such a good mood w'the woman he like, s'course he'll act that way. My amazin' self's relieved. Looks'f the Captain's a man."

Beatrice: "I wonder what that means, I suppose."

Garfiel: "No, 's j'sthat th'Captain surrounds'm self with girls too small'n too many men... Suppose'n he weren't s'close w'Emilia-sama, sa'misunderstandin' might happen."

Beatrice: "Subaru is a masculine man, in fact! He's both a man and a pervert, I suppose! He's always willing to randomly touch Betty and Petra, I suppose!"

Garfiel: “Ths’not really nice way’t vouch fer’m, ya?”

The two talked at length about Subaru’s preferences, and about his reputation of touching girls younger than him. Subaru and Emilia, satisfied with their view of the city of water, did not even hear the irrational dialogue taking place behind them.

Emilia: “Well then, it’s about time to go back. Plus, I kinda want to admire the inn again. Its shape was soooo odd but interesting.”

Subaru: “Wafu-style architecture. I also want to see it again, although for different, less charitable reasons than Emilia-tan.”(Wafu is ワフー)

Emilia: “Is that so? Haha, then, we should hurry.”

Emilia withdrew her hand from the railing, and took a few steps backward with an an excited smile. Because she was feeling a bit impatient, she didn’t take the time to confirm that there was no one behind her.

Emilia: “Ah”

???: “Whoops.”

She backed right into a man with a hood who had passing them by. She stumbled slightly, and the man reached out to steady her.

Emilia: “I-I’m sorry. I, I wasn’t looking behind me...”

Subaru: “Sorry from me too. This child, she’s so troublesome. I’ll be sure to scold her.”

A flustered Emilia apologized to the man wearing in the hood. Subaru joined her side and bowed his head to the man. He took care not to call Emilia's name, taking the precaution of keeping people from realizing who she was and causing a commotion in the streets. Of course, the hood that Emilia wore was one that hindered recognition.

So, if they made only slight contact with someone, it wouldn't develop into a huge problem. This time included.

???: "This time, I was the careless one. After all, I was a little distracted by you." Subaru: "Distracted?"

???: "The miss that I just bumped into has the silver hair of a beautiful girl, doesn't she. A girl I once wanted to marry had that same hair. Remembering that hair, I didn't avoid you in time."

Judging from his voice, the man, dressed in a long robe of the man sounded fairly young. Hearing him mention marriage, Subaru froze, and immediately judged him as a man who he didn't want near Emilia.

Subaru: "Well, we can consider this a fault from both parties. Since we've conveyed our apologies, we can both move on now."

Emilia: "Wait, Subaru. That was a kind of an insincere and apathetic apology..."

Subaru: "That's fine, no?" Emilia: "——"

Subaru wanted Emilia to leave, and Emilia herself seemed lost for words. Seeing their behavior, the man in the hood slowly shook his head.

???: "I don't mind. I don't place any anger or blame on you. If you want to

leave, feel free to leave. If we are to meet again, fate will provide us with another opportunity.”

Subaru: “Ahh, that’s very true. Well then, maybe fate will guide us to a future meeting.”

Accepting the man’s poetic farewell, Subaru responded similarly and left with Emilia’s hand in his. Subaru stole a quick glance at her. In that moment, for reasons unknown to him, Emilia wore a meaningful expression as she glanced over her shoulder at the man they’d just left.

Subaru: “Sure, my attitude wasn’t great, but I wanted protect my Emilia-tan and get her away from that strange guy.”

Emilia: “Hm? Ah, right. I genuinely didn’t think Subaru’s attitude was very nice, since it was my mistake, but, that wasn’t what I was thinking about...”

Stopping here, Emilia’s eyes reflected her confusion.

However, with a meditative expression and quivering lips, she continued,

Emilia: “That person just now, I feel like I’ve met him before... that’s how I felt, but, since his face was hidden, I couldn’t be sure...”

Subaru: “Someone Emilia-tan knows? Well, I should probably know them as well.” Emilia: “Mm... but, I don’t know. Who was he?”

Probably because it was still bothering her, Emilia turned around once more. But the figure had disappeared, and she had no idea where he’d gone.

Garfiel: “Yo, Captain. Why’re y’lookin’ s’nervous clingin’ t’Emilia-sama’s hand? Was yaafraid th’someone gonna steal her?”

Seeing Subaru and Emilia emerging from the bridge, Garfiel approached them, and Subaru stuck his tongue out at him.

Subaru: “Idiot, this is no time for games. If there’s some strange guy hanging around, you have to show up to help. If it’s an opponent that I can’t handle then Emilia-tan would be in danger.”

Garfiel: “Suppose’f that happened, then you’d protect’r with ya life. Th’s w’makes th’Captain a man.”

Subaru: “If I acted as a shield then maybe I could take one hit. Then if the enemy kept going, we’d be in trouble. I have no confidence in my endurance. Both physically and mentally.”

Hearing Subaru’s humble evaluation of himself, Garfiel laughed. He doubtlessly believed that Subaru was just humble, but, to Subaru, it was indeed a proper evaluation. It was perhaps better to say that Garfiel overestimated Subaru.

Garfiel: “No cause’t worry. If my amazin’ self think’s’t some bastard’s tryin’ t’attack ya, they’ll be sent flyin’, s’no doubt about’t. ‘Sides, th’guy did’n move like h’knew how t’fight. Was jus’n regular guy, one’wh did’n know no martial arts.”

Subaru: “You can tell that?”

Garfiel: “Jus’by lookin’. C’n also tell’t Captain likes’t swing swords ’round. My amazin’ self could tell ‘soon as y’moved yer wrists.”

Subaru: “Really? That sounds like some kind of magic trick.”

Subaru had never told Garfiel of his high school experience with kendo. Subaru had already realized that his so called skill would be of no use in this world. But his exercise bore traces, which the knowledgeable practitioners of this world could apparently see.

Subaru: “Having said that, are you still worried, Emilia-tan?”

Subaru put this thoughts to one side and spoke to Emilia, who was still gazing around, before giving up with a shake of her head.

Emilia: “Mm, it’s okay. Sorry to trouble you. Let's go back.”

Subaru: “Well, when we get back, make sure to hug Mimi for a while to make you feel better. Oops, I’ll be hugging you though, Beako, so there’s no need to be worried.”

Hearing Beatrice’s complaints and Subaru’s proud expression, Emilia laughed. Then, covering her mouth, she replied,

Emilia: “That’s true, holding Mimi does seem to be very comforting. I’ll be sure to do that.”

As Emilia spoke, she checked her surroundings once again, then dropped her uneasy gaze in exchange for a smile.

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???: “—I see. Now I understand the meaning.”

A man spoke into the cuff of his coat, the man in the hood from earlier. Recalling the girl he’d just come in contact with, his mouth curled into a smile, a smile that gave of a miserable feeling.

???: “I went out of my way to come here. If it had been for nothing then I couldn’t let it go as if nothing had happened. Since this is a special reward, this is another matter.”

The words themselves were mild, but the voice which had announced them was feverishly sticky. It was as though the feeling had been cooked in a sticky pot, and then had been left out under the sun and the moon. The feeling held that kind of unpleasantness.

???: “I will never let go of anything I own, and I want what I own to be perfectly suited for me. Since I am perfect, I have to be continually satisfied. So, feeling a vacancy would, of course, be unsatisfying.”

The man spoke as he raised his head. At that moment, his hood fell, revealing white hair. With the wind swaying his white hair, the slightly unhappy man announced,

???: “I must make her my 79th wife, to satisfy that vacancy.”

In the city of water, the white haired devil spoke in a voice full of derision.

Chapter 11: A Surprising Reunion, a Fated Reunion, and an Unintended Reunion

After the meeting with the strange man in the hood, the journey proceeded with no further incidents. Occasionally, Emilia would glance into the water, deep in thought, but she covered her discomfort with a smile before anyone could question her about it.

The only distinct feature of the man they'd encountered was his hood, but he seemed to have some kind of connection to Emilia. From Emilia's perspective, his behavior would have been fairly courteous. He may have been a little extreme in describing her hair but, more importantly, Emilia's silver hair rarely made a good impression like it had on him.

Subaru: "Speaking of which, the recognition hindering cloak..."

Subaru suddenly noticed that the effects of Emilia's magical cloak, the one she always wore to keep her identity hidden, did not affect the man just now. If the cloak had been operating at its normal effectiveness, the man would only have been able to notice Emilia's presence. However, he had apparently seen Emilia's silver hair.

Meaning that the man could resist the cloak's spell. Subaru: "Beako."

Beatrice: "So you've noticed it, in fact. Emilia and Garfiel haven't and are walking around oblivious, I suppose. Careless children, in fact."

Beatrice, walking by Subaru's side, knew exactly what he was worried about.

As she led Subaru away from Emilia, Subaru brought his hand to his chin and frowned.

Subaru: "I don't think he used any trick, but that guy was just suspicious. The cloak's cognitive obstruction shouldn't be easily resisted."

Beatrice: “So he’s either proficient in magic, or he has some blessing ... anyway, he’s not just an ordinary man, I suppose. What a bother, in fact.”

Subaru: “Should we say something to Emilia?”

Beatrice: “That’s not necessary, in fact. If he were acting with malice then Emilia probably would have noticed it, I suppose. We don’t need to over scrutinize this, in fact.”

Hearing Beatrice’s assertion, Subaru replied with a “I see” and accepted it.

Beatrice had spoken what she believed to be correct. Since she often spent time observing humans, and had been paying close attention to Emilia’s attitude, Subaru listened to her. There was no need to unnecessarily provoke unease.

Even so, Subaru and Beatrice must at least remain alert.

In this vast city, meeting the man again by chance was unlikely. But there was a chance that he sought to actively contact them, so they needed to be wary.

Garfiel: “Hurry up, Captain. If ya g’slow’s Beatrice then’d be sundown by’time we get back.” Beatrice: “Stop saying unnecessary things, I suppose. Smelly, annoying creature.”

Garfiel turned back at them and was laughing happily in response to Beatrice’s rude insults.

Suddenly, his expression changed.

His ears moved back and forth, and his nose twitched. Subaru: “What’s wrong?”

Garfiel: “Nah’s just, near t’hotel... c’sorta hear’n argument.”

They turned the corner as Garfiel finished talking and Subaru also heard the commotion. Indeed, it sounded like someone was furious.

Subaru: "It sounds like it'll turn into a fight, what a mess."

Garfiel: "Seen's th'Captain caused a fuss during th'negotiation, ya really have a right say's a mess? If I weren't at th'Chamber of Commerce, y'would've been taken by th'guards."

Subaru: "That's just my irresistible charm... Emilia-tan?"

Subaru suddenly found Emilia, who had just caught up, running past him and called out to her, but she paid him no attention.

Emilia: "That voice, it sounds really familiar... actually, I think that's Joshua's voice." Subaru: "Ah, you're right. That does sound like the voice of that weak bastard." Emilia: "I'd be worried if he was in trouble. Let's go."

Leaving the less tense Garfiel behind, Subaru raced after Emilia. Turning another corner, he could finally see the Water Plume Pavilion, where,

???: "Alright asshole, how many times are you going to make may say this!? Stop being stuck up and call your master here already!"

Joshua: "You're so barbaric that I wouldn't even call my brother here, much less my master! Please leave while I'm still capable of speaking calmly!"

???: "Can you really not understand what I'm saying, oi? Let's go, bastard!"

A young man with purple hair—Joshua stood with his arms spread in front of the hotel, quarrelling with another man. Although he was facing away from Subaru, his physique was clearly quite burly. Judging from his attitude, a brawl with Joshua would be inevitable.

Emilia: “That’s enough!”

In the time it took Subaru to judge the two men’s difference in combat prowess, Emilia had already rushed over and separated them. Having been jerked away, Joshua wore an expression of abject shock.

Joshua: “E-Emilia-sama!?”

Emilia: “I was on my way back from my business when I heard you two. Arguing in front of the inn like this. What’s the reason for your quarrel? Calm down and tell me about it.”

She spoke as if mediating an argument between two children. In that moment things settled down.

—Garfiel sighed disappointedly, as if to say “Aww, no fight?”, as he caught up with them. Joshua: “Everyone is arriving one after another... my apologies for troubling you.” Emilia: “It’s no problem. Now, please tell me about your argument.”

Joshua: “How could I trouble Emilia-sama with such a petty thing...”

Joshua stubbornly refused Emilia’s intervention in the matter, as if worried that Emilia would use this opportunity to her advantage. If that was the case, then he was being paranoid. Even in a hundred years, Emilia wouldn’t be able to come up with such a cunning idea.

???: “There ain’t much to what happened. I was sent here, but this guy wouldn’t let me in. So, I was gonna have to fight him.”

In that tense moment, the man arguing with Joshua spoke up. His sharp eyes glared at Joshua with malice, and his voice was dangerous as he complained about his reception.

Joshua: “How many times are you going to make me say it? If you’re going to disguise your identity at least do an appropriate amount of preparation. Even wearing your neat clothing, you can’t hide your true nature. You can only push a lie so far!”

???: “Oh well excuse me! Hey, I don’t like dressing up like this. I’m running someone else’s errand! Ah, fucking understand what I’m saying!”

The man scratched his head, frustrated, as Joshua refused to accept his claims. Even with Emilia’s interference, the two were still stuck of argument.

Emilia: “Really, how can we set things straight like this? Subaru, how should... Subaru?”

The two stubborn men and a confused Emilia all turned to Subaru, who stood with his hand on his chin, frowning thoughtfully. His gaze rested on the man who had been arguing with Joshua.

Emilia: “What's the matter, Subaru?”

Subaru: “No, I might be mistaken... but I think I’ve seen him somewhere before...”

???: “Huh? What, oi. Are you picking a fight with... hk!?”

Hearing the dialogue between the Subaru and Emilia, the man’s sharp gaze turned in their direction. But after seeing Subaru, he immediately stiffened.

His lips trembling, he pointed at Subaru.

???: “Y-You... that time with Reinhard...!”

Subaru: “That time with Reinhard is really specific... ah” ‘That time with Reinhard’ was Subaru’s main clue.

And then Subaru realized who he was. He was more well dressed than before, and his demeanor was slightly different, but his malicious eyes hadn’t changed.

Subaru: “Chin! Chin, right!? Wow, long time no see. Why are you here?”

Chin: “Don’t act like we know each other! Who is this ‘Chin’!? My name is Larkins!” Subaru: “So it’s Chin after all!”

Larkins: “Shut up!”

Subaru dropped a hand onto Chin’s shoulder, and Chin — Larkins, hurriedly shrugged it off. Subaru pouted at his cold attitude.

Emilia: “Do you know him?”

Subaru: “Ah. Well, he’s a familiar face that reminds me of when I first met Emilia-tan in an alley. That was when she rescued me from a robbery.”

Emilia: “Eh, that’s ri... uh, a robbery?”

Subaru: “The next time was when you were called to the King Candidate Conference and I got stuck in an alley with Priscilla and he got his friends to attack us. Yeah, he’s a great guy.”

Beatrice: “To a lady like Betty he sounds like scum, in fact.”

Hearing Subaru’s words, Emilia and Beatrice reacted thus. Garfiel, who’d been hanging back, cracked his knuckles loudly, and Joshua’s expression became even more serious.

As the situation became more sinister, Larkins's already pale face turned white.

Larkins: "W-Wait, wait. So maybe that did happen a long time ago, but let me explain why I'm here and let's forgive and forget. Yeah?"

Subaru: "Garfiel. What do you think?"

Garfiel: "Th's gonna be no pity from my amazin' self, yeh?" Larkins: "W-Wait, wait a minute! Really, wait! Waaaiitt!"

Larkins felt Garfiel's aura and immediately realized that he had no chance of winning. You could say that being able to realize this was a skill that Larkins developed just this past year.

He fell onto his knees, begging with his hands over his head, then pointed at the hotel.

Larkins: "It's the truth! I was summoned here... no, my employer was summoned here! But she said that she'd take a few laps around the city first, so I was sent to the inn to notify them. I'm not lying!"

Garfiel: "Ahh, I gotcha, I gotcha.... but hey, why don't y'try explain' more slowly?"

Garfiel's threatening attitude didn't change as he approached Larkins. Although Subaru felt bad for Larkins, he found no reason to think better of him. His dress had improved, but his character hadn't, and so he had no way to make a good impression. It was inevitable that Joshua deny him entry into the hotel. Honestly, Subaru could empathize with him.

Garfiel: "Hey, th's unlucky, bastard. Pickin' th'hotel my amazin' self's at was tough I—hk!" Garfiel was backing Larkins into a corner with a clenched hand.

However, Garfiel's movements were suddenly interrupted when he immediately swung to face the other direction.

His eyes widened for a moment, before narrowing into thin, wary lines. His hair stood on end, as his teeth, claws and muscles all reacted as if entering into a war zone.

An abrupt and immediate reaction.

Garfiel's primal fighting instincts were awakened, and thus Subaru was also infected by a sense of urgency. He turned to follow Garfiel's gaze, and,

???: "Larkins, I was worried you wouldn't return. Was there a disturbance here?" In that moment, Subaru saw an illusion of fire standing in front of him.

The flames were shining red, taking a human form. No, not just a human form—they were human. Hair the color of fire, eyes with the color of a clear blue sky. His slender body was clothed in white and his neatly arranged face was one that could never be forgotten.

His aura, slamming into everyone nearby, was the aura one would feel upon seeing a hero. That was exactly what the situation was.

There was no mistake. This man's name was, Subaru: "—Reinhard."

Upon hearing Subaru's hoarse voice, the young man in question smiled gently. The smile was a soft one, intended to calm others down.

With just that smile, Subaru felt as if he had been taken into the arms of a guardian of peace. Everyone else seemed to relax as well.

Reinhard: "It's been a while, Subaru. I didn't expect to see you here. Although our meeting is thanks to Julius, who called me here."

Subaru: “O-Oh. Long time no see. Wait, are you saying that you were also called by Julius?”

Reinhard: “Technically, it was Felt-sama accepting Anastasia-sama’s invitation. I’m just here as her knight, and I didn’t expect to see you here.”

As always, Reinhard’s presence dwarfed everyone else’s. Although Subaru had experienced this before, it had never affected him to this degree, and he found it almost difficult to carry a casual conversation.

That Subaru could feel Reinhard’s aura, which he was previously unaware of, attested to Subaru’s own growth. The more Subaru trained, the more he came to understand the difference between them.

Reinhard: “I see. It’s been a year, hasn’t it? You seem much better than you were when we last parted ways. That makes me glad.”

Subaru: “Don’t say it like that, you sound like you’re making fun of me. I was a little proud of my growth but seeing you makes me feel like it’s nothing.”

Reinhard: “I didn’t intend any such thing. In terms of my growth, I’m rather disappointed. I haven’t changed much in the past year, it’s honesty rather embarrassing.

That was probably because he’d already maxed his level and hit a growth limit. Seeing a man who was obviously already so strong but still wanted to be stronger, Subaru couldn’t help but feel intimidated.

Reinhard: “By the way, Subaru.” Subaru: “Oh, uh, what is it?”

Reinhard: “The one who’s been staring at me this whole time, is he your friend? If so, I would be glad if asked him to relax a little.”

Reinhard smiled wryly in Garfiel’s direction. Garfiel himself was incredibly tense, looking as if he was ready to rush forward with his teeth and claws to attack prey.

Those were weapons that Subaru relied on countless times last year. However, Subaru doubted that Garfiel was capable of harming the young

Reinhard that stood before him.

Subaru: “Garfiel, stop it. This is Reinhard. He’s my... friend. He’s not going to hurt you, I wouldn’t allow it.”

Subaru hesitated briefly before saying ‘friend’.

He was once personally saved by the Sword Saint and his last parting with Reinhard had been after Subaru’s humiliation at the knights’ training field. When Reinhard had reached a hand out toward him, Subaru had turned it aside.

However, while Subaru considered all of this, Reinhard nodded with ease.

Reinhard: “Now, I’ve been introduced by Subaru. I am his friend, Reinhard van Astrea. I would be grateful if you would tell me your name.”

Garfiel: “—It’s Garfiel Tinsel.”

Reinhard: “A fine name. You’re well trained. Being so young, it’s amazing.” Subaru was struck by how accurate Reinhard’s assessments were.

In the year after Garfiel had left Sanctuary, Garfiel learned much about the outside world and gained a calmer temperament. If he were to calm his demeanor and the manner in which he speaks, then Garfiel would look roughly twenty years old, when in fact he was only fifteen.

Reinhard’s remarks indicated that he’d easily seen through this.

Reinhard: “I’ve heard some of the rumors about Emilia-sama’s guards. The Strongest of Shields, Garfiel Tinsel, and the Half-Elf’s Knight, Natsuki Subaru. It brings me pride to call you my friend.”

Subaru: “I’m glad to be called by my proper title, for once.”

Reinhard: “I’ve heard some of the other titles, but they are a little less pleasant. Speaking of which, is the spirit from the title The Spirit Knight that little girl over there?”

Reinhard’s attention turned to Beatrice, who shrank down next to Subaru. At some point, she’d taken his hand. Reinhard knelt down to look into her eyes.

Reinhard: “I can tell that you are a revered and great spirit. It honors me to be able to speak with you like this.”

Beatrice: “...Betty is Subaru’s contract spirit, Beatrice, in fact. I don’t dislike your admiration, I suppose. Just, you should keep your distance, in fact. I’m sure you understand why, I suppose.”

Reinhard. “I understand completely. I’m sorry to trouble you.”

Unlike Garfiel, she revealed no obvious weariness. However, she clung to Subaru’s hand with an unusual tightness, and couldn’t conceal its slight shaking.

However, it wasn’t because she was afraid. This was something else.

And Reinhard, with his respectful, humble words, turned ceremoniously to Emilia.

Reinhard: “Emilia-sama, it’s been a long time. Even in my own territory, I have heard about your achievements many times over.”

Emilia: “Yeah, long time no see, Reinhard. It’s really been a year since the castle. We’ve also heard about your achievements, too.”

Reinhard: “We’ve done far less than Emilia-sama has. I’ve been able to do little to help my master. Compared to all that Subaru has done, I can only feel frustrated.”

Emilia: “Hahaha. Yeah, Subaru is amazing. I’m proud of my knight.”

Emilia’s chest swelled with pride after hearing Reinhard’s flattery. Although she’d obviously missed the social rhetoric in Reinhard’s words, listening to what

Emilia said made Subaru happy, even if the situation was equally embarrassing.

Anyway,

Subaru: "Looks like we've done enough greetings, but did you call Larkins's name earlier?" Emilia: "Ah, that's right. Do you know him, Reinhard?"

Reinhard: "Yeah, I do. He's currently working under Felt-sama's employ. Although finding places for him to be useful is difficult, Felt-sama has placed high hopes in him."

Subaru: "That guy, Felt hired him!?"

At this piece of unexpected information, Subaru stared in shock. Reinhard turned to Subaru and frowned apologetically at his reaction.

Reinhard: "My apologies for failing to consider your feelings, especially since I was present in the alley where you two had an encounter. Afterward, a lot of things happened... when I told Felt-sama, she demanded on the spot that I invite him over."

Subaru: "Ah, well, if you say so then I'll believe it, but... seriously, what kind of a coincidence is that? That guy, though... is it just him?"

Reinhard: "Felt-sama has hired three men, including him. Those three are indeed the ones who tried to rob you in the alley."

Subaru: "That trio gets to work together!?"

Facing this cruel, mischievous fate, Subaru couldn't help but cry to the heavens.

Immediately after being summoned to this world, Subaru had been attacked over and over by the same trio. He hadn't quite forgotten about them, but he had hardly expected to encounter them here, either.

Emilia: "Well, setting Subaru's surprise aside... Larkins is under your care, and the employ of Felt-chan, correct?"

Reinhard. "That's right. Felt-sama wanted to walk around the city and sent him to notify the inn of her arrival. I came since he had yet to return."

Reinhard repeated what Larkins had said, and Larkins nodded rigorously.

Larkins: "T-That's right! I kept saying the same thing over and over. Everybody doubted me for no reason. I demand an apology, ora!"

Reinhard: "Larkins. I have said this many times, but your words as a messenger lack mindfulness. Although people can grasp the general situation, believing you is difficult."

Larkins: "Bastard, whose side are you on!?"

Reinhard: "I'm on the side of justice. And, in this case, I think it was inevitable that my friend's brother would misunderstand."

Turning away from a fuming Larkins, Reinhard smiled Joshua, who returned him with a rather embarrassed one.

Joshua: "Long time no see, Reinhard-sama. This time, it seems that my blunder has caused your messenger to..."

Reinhard: "The fault is ours, Joshua. Also, that honorific is so annoying. I know it's been a long time, but acting so distant makes me feel a bit lonely."

Joshua: "Although my honorable elder brother and Reinhard-sama are friends, right now they are also political opponents." (nii-sama)

Reinhard: "You haven't changed. You don't have to always imitate Julius in that regard." Reinhard gave a wry smile, while Joshua seemed to clenched his

teeth.

—Anyway, the commotion had died down safely. Although the temporary problem was gone, it was replaced by the emergence of other questions. That was,

Subaru: “Even so, if both of us were called here then what’s Anastasia planning to do?”

Reinhard: “The invitation sent to us said that she wanted to exchange a useful piece of information in return for something. Although we thought that Anastasia-sama may have been up to something, we didn’t expect that Emilia-sama and you have been invited as well.”

Subaru: “Are you saying that we should be prepared for something even more shocking?” Reinhard: “That’s a possibility. What about it, Joshua?”

One of the masterminds of the appointment, the young man shifted his monocle and said, “I guess we’ll see”, to deflect the topic.

With his usual pleasant demeanor, Reinhard turned back to the hotel.

Reinhard: “This is a pretty rare structure, the Water Plumage Pavilion. I’ve heard that this style of architecture only exists in Kararagi.”

Subaru: “Ehh, that’s surprising. You haven’t seen it before either. You’ve never been Kararagi?”

Reinhard: “Yeah. I’m banned from going abroad because of fear of a breach of the treaty between each country. I even have avoid the borders. We’re close enough to Kararagi as is, so Pristella is pretty much the limit of where I can go.”

Emilia and Subaru were stunned at Reinhard’s prohibition on travel. Maybe it was a joke, but the lightly laughing Reinhard didn’t indicate that it was.

Asking about it would feel a little uneasy, so they pushed that line of

questioning back.

Subaru: "We've been here for a while, and it's kind of tiring to just linger near the entrance for so long. How about we go inside, since Felt isn't here yet?"

Reinhard: "Sure, I'm not supervising her right now. Sometimes she runs off to play around. It's nice to relax once in a while."

Larkins: "...sometimes? Isn't she always just playing around?" Reinhard: "Larkins, did you say something?"

Larkins: "Nope, nothing. So, can I go already? This is fun and all but let's hurry this shit up."

Larkins muttered a curse under his breath after requesting permission to leave. Reinhard couldn't help a sigh.

Reinhard: "Join Camberly and Gaston in guarding Felt-sama. Although there should be no danger, Rom-dono didn't accompany us, and if Felt-sama takes any dangerous action, you have to be there to stop her."

Larkins: "Ya I got it. What are you gonna do?"

Reinhard: "I'll stay with Emilia-sama at the inn. If anything happens, send me a signal with fire magic, and I'll be there in five seconds."

Larkins: "You ain't kiddin', are ya, oi."

Finished, Larkins squeezed past Subaru. Halfway past, he gave a Joshua a hard glare, still wary of Reinhard. He was really the model of petty evils.

Subaru: "Well, let's go inside. We'll say hello to Anastasia-san and tell her that Reinhard's here." Reinhard: "I believe Joshua's in charge of that. Well, let's get going."

Joshua: "...yes, I am. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Joshua looked slightly lost. Was it because the situation had played out strangely? In order to comfort him, Subaru, Reinhard, Emilia, Garfiel, and finally even Beatrice dutifully followed him into the inn.

Subaru: "I'll feel bad if I shove everything onto him." Reinhard: "I'll join Subaru in accompanying him." Emilia: "Ah, the two of them are going, I will too."

Garfiel: "'If th'Captain'n Emilia-sama are doin' it, my amazin' self's gonna too."

Beatrice: "Betty doesn't want to be the only one excluded from it, in fact... but it wouldn't bother me too much even if I were, I suppose."

Subaru/Emilia: "Yes, you're adorable." (Hai, kawaii kawaii はい、可愛い可愛い)

Subaru and Emilia, walking to her left and right, both petted her gently. Beatrice swatted their hands away, annoyed, then obediently grabbed their sleeves.

Joshua: "In here. Anastasia-sama is entertaining guests right now."

They were at a different room than the original dining hall. Subaru eyed Joshua wearily. Subaru: "Guests? Did she invite even more people?"

Joshua: "...you're about to find out, whether or not you look at me with that menacing gaze." Subaru: "Come on, my eyes aren't that scary!"

Joshua: "I can understand you even if you don't raise your voice like a witchbeast."

Subaru: "That's pretty harsh, and what kind of witchbeast? Dog, rabbit, or

whale? Pick one.”

These were Subaru’s top three most annoying witchbeasts. Although, to him, the others all seemed to be some lion-faced beast, so they made no extreme impression on him.”

While Subaru was sorting through his memories, Reinhard gently whispered “Whale”, interrupting Subaru’s train of thought.

Reinhard: “Whale, you’re talking about the White Whale, right, Subaru?”

Subaru: “...yeah, that’s right. That's the worst whale. There were so many times where I thought it was dying and it just refused to die. Thinking back on it, it was such a miracle.”

In fact, the increase in the number of white whales honestly did make their victory a miracle.

That witchbeast was such an amazing creature, and the disaster it wrought was also extraordinary. It had caused so much suffering that even now, Subaru’s chest tightened in pain at the thought.

Reinhard: “The subjugation of the White Whale, would you mind telling me about it in more detail later? I’m not a man who’s completely unrelated to that monster. Although, that would be a be a long story to tell.”

Subaru: “—Of course. As for your story, if it’s hard to tell then you don’t need to.” Subaru was only vaguely aware of Reinhard’s experiences with the White Whale.

To Subaru, the battle with the White Whale was the fruit of an old swordsman’s decade-long obsession with vengeance. And Subaru also knew of the Sword Demon’s origin, and of his relationship to the red-haired youth. As to what had happened between them, Subaru had no way of knowing.

—This wasn't a topic that Subaru could pursue out of curiosity, was how he judged it. Reinhard: "Thank you."

Thus, Reinhard responded briefly to the Subaru's thoughtfulness.

Subaru sought nothing other than that.

Seeing Reinhard's lowered gaze, Subaru gave a long sigh. Emilia and Beatrice looked at him, worried, and Subaru gave them an "I'm alright" smile.

Joshua: "We've arrived. Please wait in this tea room until their meeting ends."

Joshua, who'd finally led them to their destination, gestured to a cross-style door. Hanging on the door was a paper scroll. Subaru, although delighted, felt that his Japanese soul had become quite a bit strange.

But, his optimistic thoughts could only exist for a brief while. Joshua: "Excuse me. Would you mind being with other guests?"

He directed the question at the guests already occupying the tea room. Someone inside, who shifted slightly, responded.

???: "—Sure. We don't have much to do right now."

That calm voice gave Subaru a start. It was impossibly familiar. Not only that, Subaru had only just been thinking about its owner.

No one aside from Subaru seemed to notice it; that is, no one but Reinhard. His face became stiff, his blue eyes swaying with hesitation.

Joshua, having not noticed, opened the door. There was a quiet sound of wood on wood, as the occupants of the tea room came into sight.

Then, the occupants, seated on mats of cloth, looked over to the new guests.
Reinhard: “—Honored Grandfather.” (ojisama)

Wilhelm: “Is that, Reinhard?”

The voices of the grandfather and the grandson overlapped.

This was the unintended reunion between Reinhard Van Astrea and Wilhelm Van Astrea.

Chapter 12: Crushing Atmosphere of the Tea Room

Every one currently gathered in the tea room was someone who was exceptionally important.

Emilia: “Even so, it’s surprising that Reinhard and Wilhelm are related. It’s no wonder that they’re both skilled swordsmen.”

Subaru: “It’s natural that we didn’t know, we had no reason to. If families were based on similarities then they’d be too big, Emilia-tan.”

The wooden floor beneath the long table was covered with mats, in the style of a traditional Japanese living room. Emilia and Subaru were seated next to each other, holding a whispered conversation without discussing anything too significant. They were chatting to calm their nerves.

Beatrice: “Betty is already alert and won’t let anyone try anything, in fact. Subaru can stop staring at everyone so warily, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You know I born with a mean look, I’m not staring at anyone warily. Besides, I know what it’s like to be glared at with cold eyes.”

Beatrice was also sitting near Emilia, keeping a vigilant watch. Emilia sat with her legs folded underneath her, and Subaru had his legs crossed, while Beatrice sat with a rigid posture. It was a position she’d taken for Subaru’s sake, although she couldn’t resist fidgeting a little.

Subaru: “In any event, Garfiel’s here if something were to happen. And besides, no one here would act so rashly.”

Subaru’s gaze left Beatrice, whose knees were shaking, and directed his attention toward the corner of the tea room, where Garfiel was sitting. Although he noticed Subaru and wanted to wave at him, his hand was too busy being caught by Mimi.

Right now, several key figures in the Royal Election were gathered at the table, while the others were keeping an eye on the situation from the corners of room. In other words, Garfiel and Mimi were sitting together. Hetaro and Tibby were also present, glaring at Garfiel with dark malice.

Joshua was also seated in the tea room, looking extremely uncomfortable.

Reinhard: "I am very grateful for this hospitality. Felt-sama may be a little late in arriving since she's out in Pristella, but she should be here shortly."

Anastasia: "You don't have to be so formal, especially since you accepted my invitation on such short notice. Oh, but it's a strange coincidence that you all arrived so close together."

Anastasia took a gentle approach to meet the etiquette conscious Reinhard. Reinhard raised his head and looked at Julius, who was standing by Anastasia's side.

Reinhard: "It's been a while, Julius. We last met face to face at the Chamber of Commerce."

Julius: "Ah, that's right. I'm sorry for asking everyone to come in such little time. But, it gives me peace of mind to know that you've all kept safe."

After greeting his friend, Reinhard returned to his seat. If seating at the table reflected the positions of the factions, then Reinhard was seated at the bottom. Sitting at the head was the host, Anastasia. Next to Anastasia was Emilia and her faction, who Reinhard, representing Felt's faction, was seated next to. Across from Anastasia was,

???: "It feels like it's been a long time since everyone has gathered like this." The speaker, who wore a dignified smile, was a beautiful woman with green hair.

Amber eyes which seemed to contain the very picture of harmony, dressed in

a feminine navy blue dress, giving off an air of nobility. Although, if you'd known what she was like before, it would be hard to see her as the same person.

Emilia: "We haven't seen you in a while either, Crusch-sama. You seem to be doing well."

Crusch: "Yes, that's right. I previously caused you a lot of trouble, so let me offer my thanks. I've also heard of quite a few of the deeds that you were involved in. When I received the news, I thought that they were things only you could do."

Crusch replied to Emilia in a soft tone. Her old decisive self seemed to have disappeared along with her memory, and she had yet to recover it. She was no longer a savvy, brave politician, but merely a beautiful aristocratic lady.

If the aforementioned events that Emilia was involved in were to happen to Crusch's current self, they would surely ended in tragedy.

Ferris: "Really, hearing people talk about nyou like that was surprising. Eradicating the Sizable Hare and becoming a spiritual arts user, who would have expected that out of Subaru-kyun?"

Next to Crusch, a feminine young man with cat ears and a coy manner spoke up. He was Ferris, both Crusch's knight and the best healer of Lugunica.

Unlike his incredibly different master, Ferris hadn't changed in the slightest. It was reassuring, but, at the same time, he remained difficult to understand.

Subaru: "Well, becoming someone who people rely on has always been of the biggest goals in my life. As for my contract with Beako, well, it probably annoys you, but my life was in danger at the time so I had no choice but to make it."

Ferris: "Even though I gave nyou such a solemn warning? Subaru-kyun will eventually collapse due to his excessive use of his gate. Without Beatrice-chan, it'll crack open with a bang, so you'll have be especially careful."

Subaru: "I know. And there's no other guy who can make Beako this happy."

Although they both spoke in a relaxed tone, Ferris's warning was meant as serious, heartfelt advice, so Subaru also responded with an equally serious attitude. Dropping a hand on Beatrice's shoulder, he considered this the tuition.

Subaru: "Even so... I didn't expect Crusch-san and her faction to also have been invited. I was already surprised to encounter Reinhard outside, but now I'm about to spray nosebleeds."

Ferris: "Agh. That would be overdramatic. But, it is quite a surprise that we'd all coincidentally arrive nyon the same day, though."

Wilhelm: "Since no specific date and time was established for the meeting, that we arrived together was the result of estimates. —It's rare for us all to have a chance to gather together, so this is our good fortune."

This was the last member of Crusch camp. Sitting next to Crusch was Ferris, who was seated in a woman's pose. Next to him was the old swordsmen, Wilhelm, sipping his tea. He was dressed in the same butler outfit as always, but it suited his tea-drinking-look well.

Due to the seating arrangements, Reinhard and Wilhelm had ended up seated next to one another. Anyone who knew of their story, however, would feel uneasy.

Subaru: "They haven't even met eyes yet..."

Subaru whispered his observation to Emilia, who quietly agreed.

Wilhelm and Reinhardt were, as grandfather and grandson, direct relatives, but, aside from offering mutual pleasantries, they had yet to acknowledge each other.

The tea room was dominated by silence, and Subaru took time to think their situation over. The members of Emilia's faction were, whether due their attitude, nature, or childishness, all largely unskilled at reading the mood.

It was also hard to forget how Joshua, who had returned after being summoned away, had given a scared "Whaa" when he saw the situation.

House Astrea. The name was so well known that even Subaru knew a little of their family history. Sword Saint was a title that was passed from generation to generation, and the lineage of Sword Saints meant that the Astraa family probably had the history of greatest combat strength throughout of all of Lugunica.

Wilhelm's obsession with the White Whale obviously came from the defeat of his wife, the previous Sword Saint. Connecting these facts would lead to one question.

—Why did Wilhelm choose to borrow the power of Crusch's faction, rather than the power of his own house?

Taking the question further, why had Reinhard not participated in the fight against White Whale?

Wilhelm had said that he'd started chasing the White Whale about fourteen years ago. If the Royal Election had been ongoing, then Wilhelm could not cooperate with Reinhard, who was a member of the an enemy faction. That made sense.

But, when Wilhelm had begun his hunt for the White Whale, House Astrea had nothing to do with the Royal Election. Of course, then Reinhard would still have been a child, and would have lacked the ability to defeat the White Whale. But, considering his later growth, why had Reinhard never sought out the White

Whale?

Wilhelm's sentiments and Reinhardt's thoughts, Subaru had no insight into either.

—If they were ever willing to discuss it, he'd love to listen.

However, asking directly would be like unscrupulously cutting an old wound and rubbing salt on the scars.

And although Natsuki Subaru was incredibly curious, he'd grown quite a bit in the past year. He'd come to understand that if he pressed the topic, people would find him annoying.

Reinhard and Wilhelm, though they were in hostile factions, were both valuable, talented people who Subaru had a stable relationship with. That single curiosity aside, the level of trust that they placed in him was hardly low.

So, all he could do was hope that someone else would bring it up.

Emilia: "By the way, Anastasia-san, why did you gather everyone here? I think you had some purpose... right?"

Unaware of Subaru's preoccupation, Emilia directed a question at Anastasia, who tilted her head with a smile.

Anastasia: "Of course, I have something that I'd like to discuss with each of you, but, to answer Emilia-san's question, I had to think pretty hard to come up with something that would entice each of you here."

Emilia: "We came for the magic stones, but what about the others?"

Anastasia: "Everyone has their own wants and needs. Using just those to gather everyone would have been fairly easy... but there are those odd groups whose wants are mysterious."

Emilia: “I don’t understand...?”

Emilia frowned and crossed her arms as she considered the issue, although the problem wasn’t a difficult one. Just observing who was currently not present would pinpoint the faction that refused to be communicative.

Emilia: “Were Priscilla-sama and Al-dono not invited?”

Anastasia: “Those two are completely set on their own path and I wouldn’t know where to start finding out what they want. To be honest, even Felt-san treats land and money like they’re completely irrelevant.”

Reinhard: “Regarding that, Felt-sama actually volunteered to come on a whim. That said, I do wish she’d care a little more about those matters.”

Anastasia and Reinhard spoke of the matter plainly and expressed the same opinion. Upon hearing their words, Emilia, who could only agree with them, raised her hand.

Emilia: “I’d also like to know more about everyone’s circumstances. Although I’ve worked hard to learn, it’s difficult to understand everyone’s positions.”

Subaru: “Then let's not talk about what happened today...”

Emilia: “Hmph, Subaru you meanie.”

Emilia’s cheek was being pinched by his right hand. His left hand still rested on Beatrice’s shoulder, where, either as reward or punishment, it had sat for a little too long.

At any rate, the positions of Priscilla’s faction and Felt’s faction were clear.

Then all that was left was the reason, perhaps the weakness, that lead Crusch here.

Crusch: "As to why we came to Pristella, it was because Anastasia-sama seems to have some information regarding Gluttony."

Subaru: "———"

As if reading Subaru's thoughts, Crusch replied.

Crusch's words struck Subaru like a bullet, and it was something that he could not overlook. Meanwhile, Anastasia caressed her scarf with a wry smile.

Anastasia: "I wasn't keeping anything from Natsuki-kun, but, there is a matter of priorities. Under these circumstances, solving Crusch's problems should take precedence. Isn't that right?"

Subaru: "Gah, gr... shu-, fu-. F-Fine, that's fine." Julius: "I see you've grown up a little."

Subaru: "Shut up! I'm already on the verge of exploding."

Selling to the highest bidder was the basis of decision making in business.

Subaru managed to put the brakes on his fury at Anastasia's explanation, which was fortunate, since Julius had begun to look uneasy.

Subaru: "Who are you, my parents? On that topic, my dad could beat me up ten times better than you ever could!"

Ferris: "Eh... Ferri-chan is scared..."

Subaru: "Don't be shaken so easily! Are you scared of your own family!?"

Subaru snapped at Ferris, who had snuggled into Crusch, but he was joking rather than scolding. On that note, his words about his father, Kenichi were

certainly true.

Anastasia's reason was acceptable. However, it would be another matter entirely if the information were to be given to only Crusch and not Subaru. Information on Gluttony was crucial to restoring Rem, who was still sleeping in Roswaal's mansion.

Even though he'd accepted the reason, he wouldn't be so easily swayed.

Anastasia: "Even though you're making such a scary face, you'll feel more at ease after you've heard the full story."

Subaru: "Then.... it's true?"

Anastasia: "It's not a lie, and I'm sure that Crusch's faction has no intention of keeping it to themselves."

Subaru turned to Crusch, who seemed to have some difficulty maintaining a composed expression.

Crusch: "It's only natural. Of course, in order to retrieve my memory, I want the information on Gluttony. However, I also know that Subaru is also determined to defeat Gluttony for that young girl's sake. Under such circumstances, I have no desire to monopolize the information."

Subaru: "Crusch-san..."

Crusch: "In addition, the more comrades I find who share my goal, the better. The more people there are working against sinners like the Witch Cult, the more likely we are to win."

Crusch, who spoke in a light tone, gave Subaru peace of mind.

Her true desire was, of course, to restore her memories and improve her flaws. But that didn't interfere with her goodwill toward Subaru.

Holding an honorable nature which had not been dimmed at all by her amnesia was this woman named Crusch Karsten.

Subaru: "I'm grateful. Thank you, Crusch-san. I will cherish the opportunity that you've handed me. Definitely."

Crusch: "That said, the information is our priority. We won't concede that."

In response to Subaru's determination, Crusch straightened her back and met his gaze.

Of course. They shared a heated competition. But her benevolent smile was out of place for this occasion, so she and Subaru laughed together.

The one who interrupted the moment was Crusch's knight.

Ferris: "Nyau. Seeing Subaru and Crusch-sama like this is really annoying, stop it. Subaru's such a greedy man. Are the two girls at your side not enough? Really nyow!"

Crusch: "Ferris, that's not a very courteous thing to say. Subaru isn't someone who'd be swayed by temptations like that."

Subaru: "Yeah, don't say that. Certainly, Crusch-san is beautiful and very cute but I have a loyal heart... although it is split in two right now, but—
owowowowow!?"

Beatrice: "That's not a very loyal heart, in fact. You should just stay quiet and reflect on what you just said, I suppose."

Subaru, who'd been trying to agree with Crusch, had his ear caught in Beatrice's tight grip. His eyes watered in protest, but before he could complain, he noticed that she was pointing at Crusch.

Following Beatrice's finger, Subaru saw that Crusch was wearing a bright blush. Thinking back, what odd words had he spoken?

Subaru: "Oh no, Emilia-tan, did I say something strange?"

Emilia: "Huh? Hmm, I'm not sure. Subaru, you just talked the way you usually talk to me..." Subaru: "That's right. Then what did I do? Holding Emilia-tan's hand lets me think better, may I?" Emilia: "Yes yes. Try your hardest."

Subaru tapped his forehead with the hand that held Emilia's, as he cast a gloomy look. Meanwhile, Ferris took the opportunity to whisper to Crusch,

Ferris: "See, it's like that. Subaru-kyun is unconsciously excessively friendly to everyone he meets and always tries to play a cool and handsome act. It's like he's messed up in the head. Don't pay it any attention."

Crusch: "Yes, I'll be careful. Ha, I was a little shocked." Crusch placed a hand on her chest with a sigh of relief.

Subaru found this feminine action incredibly cute. Crusch and Ferris, who were unaware of his thoughts, held hands as if making a promise to each other. Anyone who stumbled across this scene would have assumed that they were girlfriends.

Now, everyone had revealed their reasons for coming to Pristella.

???: "Ehh, everyone's here already. Originally I heard that I was supposed to just meet with the lady from Kararagi."

The paper door was thrown open, revealing the girl standing behind it.

She was an agile, pretty blonde girl with large chestnut-red eyes and a crooked smile. Her small face was full of naughty charm and her slim but agile physique seemed a touch more feminine. Just as before, she was dressed in a outfit focused on enhancing movement speed, one that also happened to leave

her navel and legs exposed.

Felt: “What, surprised that I still look this way? It’s only been a year, you know.” Reinhard: “Felt-sama.”

Everyone slumped their shoulders upon seeing her, and Felt caught their disappointment. Reinhard, however, stood up to welcome his master as she approached.

Reinhard: “I was sure I left a change of clothes on the dragon carriage, what happened?”

Felt: “Bah! I wanted to go sightseeing in something comfortable. Saying that, you wanted me get changed in the hotel, but who would wear something that looks so itchy? You should know that about me by now!”

Reinhard: “That’s really just like you...”

Reinhard placed a hand on his forehead, speaking in a helpless tone. Felt, who was dragging the kingdom’s strongest hero around like a plaything, looked happy to enter the room.

Felt: “Right, and here I am. —I’m grateful for your hospitality today and I hope that our discussions will go well. There, all done with greetings.”

For a moment, Felt resembled a noble’s daughter. She gave a naughty smile and mimed a curtsy without a skirt, and immediately reverted to her usual self.

Subaru was quite self-aware of his own disagreement with the aristocratic community, but Felt’s attitude toward them seemed to have worsened notably in the past year.

Felt: “Man, this is a really bizarre building. I’ve never seen one like it before,

so I got curious and explored a little before coming here.”

Felt sat down on the mat originally occupied by Reinhard, who moved another one over and sat earnestly next to her.

By chance, Felt was now next to Wilhelm, separating grandfather and grandson. Emilia: “Well, long time no see, Felt-chan. How have you been?”

Felt: “It’s weird to have -chan added to my name. Well anyway, I’ve been well. You, sister, have been... a little too lively, no? I’ve heard a lot of rumors about really scary things.”

(she calls Emilia ‘N?chan’)

Emilia: “It’s Subaru who’s been lively, not me. As for me, I’ve just been lucky to be saved Subaru’s hard work.”

Felt: “Ah! That’s right!”

Upon hearing Emilia's reply, Felt leapt to her feet with a clap of her hands, her eyes fixed straight at Subaru.

Felt: “I’ve heard a ton of ridiculous rumors about you, brother. I’ve just got to know, how many of those rumors are actually true?”

Subaru: “It seems like you’ve decided that they were all fake before even asking me. Your level of faith is disappointingly low.”

Felt: “Because they’re so wild! I heard that you cut the White Whale in half by yourself, you crushed a sin archbishops skull to bits with you own two hands, and even the Sizable Hare was roasted and eat—”

Subaru: “I was really involved in all of those, but the rumors have been blown hundreds of times out of proportion!”

If Subaru really had done as the rumors said, then he’d be hailed the kingdom’s hero and would probably even have been put on the throne. With that authority, he’d have made Emilia queen and they’d be ruling together.

Julius & Wilhelm: “—Heh.”

Subaru's reaction had drawn a small laugh from the audience. There two sources of laughter were from people sitting on opposite sides of the room, Julius and Wilhelm.

The two, both of whom seemed to have felt embarrassed at their unconscious reaction, sought each other out and relaxed when they found someone who'd given a similar response. Felt, whose eyes had been darting back and forth in confusion, asked,

Felt: “Why did the old man and the knight laugh? Me, did I say something strange?”

Subaru: “Everything you said was strange! You gave me too much credit. If I did that much then I'd deserve a Nobel Peace Prize!”

Although Subaru didn't fully understand what he had earned, he knew that it was meant to be a symbol of honor. When he was presented with the medal he hadn't fully understood its actual and symbolic value, so he'd never personally felt the merit associated with it.

In fact, the medal that he'd received was quite valuable in the kingdom.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono was indispensable during the battle with the White Whale. If he were not there, I have no doubt that we all would have perished. It sounds like an exaggeration, but it is no laughing matter.”

Julius: “The same is true of the battle with the Witch Cult. The one who developed our tactics against them was him. Were he not there, myself and the others who had helped would not have been able to bring down the Sin

Archbishop.”

Subaru: “———”

Overwhelming faith from Wilhelm and Julius.

Their straightforward support for him struck Subaru speechless. The lively atmosphere left his entire body burning with embarrassment. His face was red from ear to ear, and blood was liable to spray from his eyes at any moment.

Subaru: “N-No, stop it! Don’t praise me so much! The higher you raise me, the more my ego is stoked, shouldn’t you all be clear on that!?”

Julius: “No, not at all. Although it is true that you made a fool of yourself at the start of the Royal Election, you’ve proven your worth time and time again. You have more than made up for that disgrace. You absolutely deserve to be so commended.”

Wilhelm: “There is absolutely no need for humility. You’ve had a hand in accomplishing great things. Those successes would never have happened had you not been present. I will be proud to have shared a battlefield with you until the end of my days.”

Subaru: “—Ah, um.”

So far, Subaru had died in a number of painful, gruesome ways.

However, this would be by the most horrifying. Being pelted with compliments.

Subaru, embarrassed to the verge of death, looked to Emilia and Beatrice, pleading for help. However, they merely smiled sweetly.

Emilia: “That’s right. Subaru has worked sooo hard. I’m truly proud to have him as my knight.” Beatrice: “W-Well, since he’s Betty’s partner, it’s only

natural that he's so successful, in fact.

He's only going to be more and more amazing, I suppose. So it's a good habit to get used to praising him, in fact!"

The situation having gone in an entirely unexpected direction, Subaru was stricken with panic. Then, everyone took turns speaking.

Reinhard: "Amazing, Subaru. Everyone praises you for doing something amazing, something no one else could have done. I'm glad to call you my friend."

Crusch: "I would have lost so many loyal men without Subaru-sama's help, even Wilhelm, who has been supporting me to this day. Allow me to thank you again."

Ferris: "Although you don't have any combat ability, you never lost heart during the battle with the White Whale. It allowed Crusch-sama to make the speech that changed the tide of the battle. In short, thank you very much."

Anastasia: "Thanks to Natsuki-kun's information, myself and countless other businessmen are no longer plagued by the White Whale's fog. You have my gratitude."

Mimi: "Oohh! Are we taking turns complimenting big brother? He's very strong! He's very handsome! The only thing he's missing is Mimi! Your turn, Garf!"

Garfiel: "Ya, I dunno w'happen, but deservin' th'praise, that's th'Captain. Th's my amazin' bro. Th's a, Fame comes with the right way and where in."

People were taking advantage of the momentum and piling flattering remarks on Subaru, who was blushing from all the warm encouragement. Felt treated him with a laugh.

Felt: “It sounds like they were true, but... it looks like brother’s nature is hasn’t changed. That’s a relief!”

Subaru: “You guys, stop it! Everyone’s ganging up on me!!”

After Felt summarized the farce taking place, Subaru could no longer withstand it and exploded. The tension which had originally cloaked the tea melted away with the sound of laughter.

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Subaru: “Ah, damn, really I’m about to disintegrate and die...”

After the fun in the tea room had dissipated, an exhausted Subaru had left for his room.

Everyone had inexplicably showered Subaru with praise, before occupying themselves with cross faction conversations, as if forgetting about their opposition.

Of course, it couldn’t be said that no one had any intent of trying to delve into the secrets of the other factions, but most of the conversations were just idle, fun chatter.

Although the candidates could at any moment end up in a confrontation, from another point of view, they were all women of a similar age, so conversation on topics other than the state of the kingdom came quite naturally to them.

In fact, Emilia had been very much looking forward to having an opportunity to talk with other girls her age.

Subaru: “Well, it could be said that a conversation between Emilia-tan and Beako would be just like that...”

Beatrice: “Don’t bring up her real age, in fact. Do you want to start a war, I suppose?” Beatrice reprimanded the imprudent Subaru with a sharp voice.

Turning to see the source of the sound showed Beatrice sitting on a quilted pile of blankets in his room, desperately trying to ease her numb feet.

Subaru: “Even though you’re a spirit your feet fell asleep. Aren’t spirits supposed to not have circulation, though?”

Beatrice: “I have circulation, Betty’s body is designed to imitate an actual human body as closely as possible, in fact. Betty will feel the pain that humans can feel, I suppose. If I dive underwater for too long, I’ll lose consciousness, in fact.”

Subaru: “So you breathe, too?”

Beatrice: “Of course I do... hey, don’t try to sniff Betty’s breath, I suppose!”

As Subaru’s nose approached her, a somewhat embarrassed Beatrice pulled the quilts around herself. Subaru took the opportunity to flick her numb foot, which felt like it had sprung back to life. Beatrice’s eyes watered.

Beatrice: “That hurts, in fact... I’m about to cry, I suppose... Subaru’s a bully, in fact...” Subaru: “Okay, okay, my bad, my bad. Come here, come here.”

He patted his knees with a wry smile as he sat down, and Beatrice moved from the quilts to his lap. Caressing Beatrice’s twintailed head, Subaru said to himself, “but then again...”

Subaru: “The interior decor make it a nice room, and it looks like the staff did their best to match the rest of the hotel... but here are some subtle deficiencies.”

It was probably caused by woodworking technology developing differently

here than it had in his original world.

The design of Water Plume Pavilion felt quite similar to the design of a hotel from Subaru's original world, but in spite of the presence of wooden beams and paper doors, there was a certain something that felt off.

The beds probably took many painstaking attempts to figure out before the designers had decided on laying animal skins on a wooden bed.

The feeling wasn't bad, it was just a slight deviation from what Subaru was used to.

Subaru: "I really can't agree with not sleeping on the floor just because social norms dictate that blankets have to go on beds."

Beatrice: "Putting a blanket directly on the floor is poverty, in fact. Betty can't condone her partner becoming a man with no earnings, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm always working you so hard." Beatrice: "What's that supposed to mean, in fact?" Garfiel: "What're y'two chatterin' on about?"

Beatrice, who had been engaging in coordinated banter with Subaru, jumped up at the sudden appearance of a third voice. However, her feet were still numb so she lost her balance and fell into the bundle of quilts on the floor. Subaru quickly reached over and righted her.

Subaru: "Garfiel? Is your adventure over?"

Garfiel: "Th'midget finally let'm go free after an spendin' th'entire day. Beatrice's, why'r ya actin' crazy?"

Subaru: "She's never been so far away from home before, so she's super excited! She even had trouble sleeping, isn't she cute?"

Standing at the entrance to the room, Garfiel laughed hard enough to reveal his sharp teeth.

Because the guest room also had a paper door, Beatrice hadn't heard it open and was scared at the sudden intrusion. Subaru, on the other hand, was sitting facing the entrance, so he'd seen Garfiel immediately.

Subaru: "So, what's up? Dinner?"

Garfiel: "Nah, dinner prob' won't be 'till later. Th's nothing for me t'do alone in m'room, Captain, and 'sides, Otto-nii still hasn't come back yet."

Subaru: "Well, Otto isn't a kid, so you don't have to worry too much about him. Even if we incur some debt here, I doubt he'd give us any extra trouble in solving it."

Garfiel: "Right."

Otto had left a few hours ago to go settle a debt. Garfiel has no objection to this, since, after all, he knew what Otto was like.

Of course, when it came to asking him for help, there was something incredibly reliable about him.

Subaru: "But those are different things." Garfiel: "What're y'talkin' about now?"

Of course, Garfiel was used to Subaru's frequent mutters to himself. Garfiel gestured toward the corridor with his chin.

Garfiel: "If y'don't have anythin' goin' on, can the Captain tag 'long with me

for a bit?”

Subaru: “Tag along with you? Oh, a bath? A bath, right? You mean a bath? Open air bathing is too good to pass up on. I was looking around earlier and I found bathrobes, the thought of seeing Emilia-tan in a bathrobe is enough to raise my spirits! They’ve been raised already!”

Tatami and the architectural style were very difficult to reproduce, but the bathrobe appeared to have been commercialized. Subaru gave a mental tribute here to those in Kararagi who had been responsible for it.

However, standing before such an excited Subaru, Garfield wore a serious expression, one that was somber enough that even Subaru couldn’t continue to joke around. A worried look came to his face.

Subaru: “Garfiel. What’s wrong? Is there something you want to do?” Garfiel: “No, ’s not really th’big ‘f a deal, but...”

Touching the white scar on his forehead forehead white scars, Garfield fell silent for a moment. Then he stared straight at Subaru.

Garfiel: “I jus’ wanted t’know exactly how strong th’world greatest hero is.”

Chapter 13: Peaceful Dinner

The Water Plumage Pavilion's rustic courtyard, paved in gravel, was full of Japanese hospitality. Although expecting an extravagant pond would be too much, the bamboo-like plants on the sides of the stone road were a nice touch.

Subaru: "Even so, Wilhelm-san didn't join us."

Subaru sat in a corridor facing the courtyard, picking at the gravel with his toes.

He thought of the white-haired old man had who had indifferently declined Subaru's invitation with an apologetic expression. What was Wilhelm up to?

Alone in his room, he would certainly feel bored until dinnertime.

Subaru: "That said, he doesn't seem like the kind of person who'd be concerned with how others spend their time."

Julius: "Saying it like that makes it sound like we're spying, even though we were invited here." Subaru: "It's not like I'm here because I wanted to be... even though I am here..."

Subaru replied to Julius with sarcasm, who sat next to him in the hallway with his legs crossed gracefully. Julius nodded with a smile, as if to say "Truly". However, the man sitting on the other side of Subaru didn't want to admit it as frankly.

Ferris: "Oh, please. Hah, do you think Ferri-chan's is here because he wanted to see it? Subaru-kyun just dragged me here and he was just so annoying that I didn't want to protest."

Subaru: “Well, I’m sorry I guess. You should be here in case anything bad happens. Although, it seems that isn’t going to be necessary.”

Subaru squinted at Ferris, who was shaking his cat ears in agitation, then looked past him to the fast-paced battle that was taking place in the courtyard.

Frankly, the battle moved so quickly that Subaru’s eyes could barely keep up. Even so, he could plainly assert,

Subaru: “Really, Reinhard is a damn monster.”

Ferris: “It would be hard enough to deny it under normal circumstances.”

—The sight that was unfolding before them affirmed their conclusions.

In the courtyard paved with gravel, a fierce match was being staged between a roaring blond teenager and the red-haired hero defending against him.

The challenger, Garfiel, burned through an endless flow of motivation as he struck at Reinhard from every possible angle. However, whether using claws, fangs, legs, elbows, or knees, each of his attacks were seen through and evaded with ease.

Not to mention,

Subaru: “That guy, is he really just standing there without moving?”

Julius: “It was the original condition, after all. Reinhard would never violate it. Nevertheless, failing to force him to do so is probably humiliating for Garfiel.”

Garfiel kept launching attacks at Reinhard from different directions, trying to take those opportunities to expose an Achilles heel. But no matter how much he tried, Garfiel wasn't going to find a weakness that didn't exist. Not only that, Reinhard was dodging without much effort.

Reinhard had been standing in the same place since the start of this rash challenge, having never conceded an inch.

As Garfiel rushed at him repeatedly, Reinhard's two feet remained fixed in place.

—At first, when Garfiel visited Reinhard's room to challenge him, Subaru had summed it up as a reckless move.

Thinking back, that Reinhard even agreed to Garfiel's challenge was unexpected.

Frankly, the match was solely a product of Garfiel's desire. Accepting the challenge wouldn't have provided Reinhard with any benefit. If you consider the difference of strength between the two then Reinhard presumably wouldn't have a childish sense of masculinity to flaunt.

If you consider the complicated relationship between Reinhard, the royal knights, and his political opponents, then fighting Garfiel is in some respects an unnecessary danger. Even if he'd believed that no one had set up any tricks or traps, accepting the challenge was still unnecessary. dismissing the idea entirely.

However, from the bottom of his heart, Subaru wanted to witness its fulfillment.

The one who took the responsibility of serving as the fighting power of Emilia's faction was, without any doubt, Garfiel Tinsel. However, outside conditions could often influence the outcome of a conflict, so achieving victory solely through battle was plainly impossible. Furthermore, Garfiel's flaws weren't few in number, either.

Emilia's faction had gained much fame throughout the past year and much attention was directed toward Garfiel.

Because everyone within Emilia's faction recognized and praised his strength, Garfiel himself was quite arrogant. He had always been able to live up to those expectations with results and achievements.

However, this one-sided consideration of Garfiel also posed a troubling fact. Garfiel had yet to face enough opponents as strong as him since leaving Sanctuary.

The only person who had fought him on equal footing was the homicidal demon Elsa, during the battle in Roswaal's old mansion, and it had ended in Garfiel's victory. Since then, he hadn't experienced any hard-fought battles that would have compelled him to show off his full strength.

Although Garfiel had indeed once lost to Subaru, Otto, and Ram, the conditions of that victory could be entirely attributed to their dirty tricks.

In terms of a proper, clean battle, Garfiel Tinsel was a man who had never experienced defeat since birth.

—Therefore, even knowing that it was cruel, Subaru longed for a battle between Reinhard and Garfiel to happen.

To continue without losses, and to remain unaware of his limits. That wasn't an impossible path.

However, if he remained ignorant of his own limits and merely relied on the luck of continuously facing weaker opponents, then Garfiel would never be certain of exactly where his own strength lay.

Reinhard van Astrea, the hero whom Subaru had only seen in action once. Subaru chose to trust in his power.

Subaru: "I trusted his power... but I didn't think the difference would be this great."

The situation had proceeded in the exact direction that Subaru had hoped it would. However, he wasn't as surprised as he was astonished, to the point where overreactions would have been superfluous.

Having brought an excited Garfiel to Reinhard's room, Subaru made the blunt request and Reinhard readily consented to it. Subaru had been so surprised he'd almost fallen over.

Afterward, in response to Garfiel's suggestion of going out of the city to avoid casualties, Reinhard had responded with a smile, "The yard is spacious enough, although we should mention to the manager that we won't be damaging his land."

Reinhard probably hadn't intended for his words to carry any malice but they served as more than enough provocation for Garfiel.

Garfiel had accepted Reinhard's proposal, exuding an aura of anger so intense that Subaru, who was standing beside Garfiel at the time, barely retained his composure when he felt his rage all but stab into Reinhard.

They had then proceeded down towards the hotel courtyard where a few rules were set. Weapons were not allowed, nor were dangerous blessings. Wounding the other party was also prohibited.

During that time, Subaru had called Ferris in case of any injuries. Subaru also invited Julius and Wilhelm as commentators on the battle itself. Unfortunately, Wilhelm had declined, so it ended up being just Julius and Ferris who watched the battle with him. On that note, Otto still had yet to return.

Subaru: "By the way, I didn't mention this to the women or Mimi's brothers."

Julius: "I think that's wise. If Anastasia-sama learned of this then she would no doubt turn it into a performance. If it reaches Hetaro or Tivey, then Mimi would surely be upset."

Julius agreed with Subaru as they surveyed the courtyard. Of course, when there was such an exciting battle happening, people would inevitably become excited.

A handful of spectators gathering was something that Garfiel surely had considered from the very beginning of the match. Rather than regret a poor performance for being unable to go all out, he wanted the fight to be taken somewhere where real skill was all that mattered.

The hotel courtyard was spacious, and the scenery could be appreciated, but if it were to serve as the setting for a fierce battle then it wasn't spacious enough. And Reinhard had also raised the condition of "no damage to the environment".

The setting was meant to push Garfiel to either be considerate or to regret being overtaken by anger, as a boy naturally would. What would come of this?

Subaru: "Hey, Julius, can I ask you one question?"

Julius: "You can ask me more than one if you like but whether or not I'll answer is another story."

Subaru: "Don't say such ambiguous things. This is why I hate you."

Subaru dropped his face onto one hand, and began speaking in a serious tone.
Subaru: "In your opinion, how is Garfiel?"

Julius: "—He's strong. According to the rumors, he is the shield guarding Emilia-sama. It is a well deserved reputation. Although, knowing of his association with you, my expectations were psychologically lowered."

Subaru: "I'm going to beat you up."

Julius: "He is strong. His talent is certainly real. In terms of combat alone, I don't know whether or not I could beat him. And he has plenty of room for growth."

Julius's powerful assertion revealed that he was excited to see that possibility and that the potential sleeping within Garfiel was quite genuine.

He also seemed to embrace his envious admiration of Garfiel's talent. This was no surprise. Julius was also a man of battle.

Ferris: "Buutt, even if there is a bright future awaiting him, it's sad that right nyow he's just being toyed with."

Ferris spoke a cruel truth.

However, no one could say nothing to deny it. Everyone could see that. Garfiel himself could see it more clearly than anyone else.

Perhaps Garfiel would one day walk amongst the strongest. Perhaps he'd be

the strongest.

But, right now, facing off against the strongest man in the world, what he was going through would surely best be described as being toyed with.

Garfiel: “——tch.”

Reinhard: “That’s a shame. Too hasty.”

The Sword Saint reaches out forward, catching Garfiel’s arm. With a giant swing, he throws him mercilessly down to the hard gravel.

A cloud of dust surrounds him, knocking the wind out of Garfiel. He quickly attempts to get back on his feet only to find Reinhard’s hand on his forehead, leaving Garfiel motionless before drawing a sigh,

Garfiel: “I lost.”

Even being scrutinized by others, he admitted defeat.

The ability to make that admission most likely indicated that Garfiel was still maintaining his sense of self-esteem, even if barely.

Subaru hoped that would serve as some small comfort to him, at the very least.

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— Garfiel didn’t appear for dinner that night.

Anastasia: “Why’d you go off by yourselves and hide such an interesting thing from us?” Anastasia glared at the men as she voiced her bitter complaints.

Rather than being dressed in her usual white fur, she was wearing a bathrobe, her purple hair dripping with water. Her white skin was silhouetted against the yukata, her childlike charm still evident.

Julius: “I think things are different from the way you’re phrasing it, but I specifically didn’t invite Anastasia-sama since you seemed to be having intimate conversations with the other candidates.”

Julius met her straightforward words with a wry smile and a bow. The men had finished cleaning the courtyard after the contest and had only just returned.

Hearing that remark, a mischievous smile appeared on Anastasia's lovely face.

Anastasia: “Ahh. My knight seems to be speaking some rather sophisticated sophistry. We can’t connect everything to money, can we? But, my Kararagi spirit, who likes fun and turmoil, is still a little upset.”

Subaru: "The spirit of our strongest shield hurts more, so let’s not bring it up again. Ah, he’ll be fine after a night of hanging his head in sorrow, but until then, please let him recover in peace.”

Following what Anastasia had said, Subaru made this request out of concern for his emotionally troubled honorary little brother. Everyone present nodded in assent. However,

Felt: “Anyway, is that what happened? This merciless knight here doesn’t know how to be nice to opponents and the like. Sorry about that, brother.”

After hearing about the incident, Felt gave Subaru a crooked-toothed laugh as she fiercely pounded Reinhard's shoulders, the red-haired knight sitting next to her with a wry smile.

Reinhard: "Felt-sama, speaking like that will lead to misunderstandings. I didn't exert any undue pressure in the battle just now, and I myself was at risk several times. Both my body and mind were enriched from that experience."

Felt: "That's not at all convincing considering how scared Larkins and the others are of you. Did you really have to freak them out so much when you first met?"

Reinhard: "No matter who I face, I can not afford to be arrogant. If I become too trusting in my ability, it will result in my failure."

Faced with Reinhard's resolute determination, Felt gave a disinterested sigh.

Although their dialogue reflected the nature of their transition to proper master and subordinate status, Reinhard's words were of greater concern to Subaru.

Having witnessed the battles in the courtyard, he saw clearly the root of Garfiel's concern. In a brief epiphany, he realized that Reinhard's words contained no irony or hypocrisy.

Reinhard was merely saying what he believed to be truth. Although this speech may sound unpleasant, the authenticity of his words seemed to prevent anyone from thinking so.

Perhaps that was his most dangerous ability.

Reinhard: "Speaking of which, Felt-sama. About that outfit."

Felt: "What is it, are you complaining? I was taking a bath with others, and

everyone changed into this, so I did too. ‘It’s embarrassing, it’s disappointing’, is that what you want to tell me?”

Reinhard: “Not at all, I just wanted to tell you that it suits you well.”

Felt: “Annoying!”

Those sweet words from the respected, revered, and most powerful knight.

Countless women would be incredibly envious of the beautiful bouquet of words that Felt had swatted away with the expression of frustration. The way she wore her bathrobe also suggested that she was someone who was a little rough around the edges.

—As Anastasia had said earlier, the women were in the bath house while the match outside between Garfiel and Reinhard had been going on.

For that reason, all of the women attending dinner were in yukatas.

Not only Anastasia and Felt, but also Mimi, Crusch, Emilia, and even Beatrice were all dressed in bathrobes.

Subaru: “Beako, you unexpectedly took a bath...”

Beatrice: “After Subaru left Betty alone in the hotel I was captured by Emilia, in fact. She forced Betty to go, I suppose.”

Unexpectedly wearing a pale blue bathrobe, the cute Beatrice seemed to be having difficulty figuring out how to correctly don the yukata. Strangely, Beatrice’s wet hair retained its usual drill-tailed form. If he yanked on her curly hair then they would probably bounce more crisply than usual.

Subaru: "So, that's Beako's testimony, but what's the truth?"

Emilia: "Hm? Beatrice looked so lonely when she told me that Subaru left her, and since I'd just been invited to go bathing, I took her with me. I thought she looked happy about it, though..."

Beatrice: "T-That's a lie, in fact! Don't fabricate the truth, I suppose! Betty or Emilia, who does Subaru believe more, I suppose!"

Subaru: "I'll take that as your confession."

Combine Beatrice's unflattering claim with Emilia's assertive judgment, Subaru arrived at the natural conclusion.

Seeing Beatrice unwilling to yield, Emilia gave a happy smile. She also wore a bathrobe, her freshly washed silver hair gathered in the back. Subaru quietly delighted in seeing the whiteness of her neck.

Subaru: "It's merely the heat of love. Emilia-tan, can I braid your hair?" Emilia: "Sure, but food will be served soon. Afterwards?"

Emilia pointed toward the table, and Subaru reluctantly retracted the hand that had been stroking her hair. The people around them seemed to be looking at them strangely.

Subaru tilted his head at the person opposite of him, who happened to be Felt. Subaru: "What's so weird?"

Felt: "I don't know too much about you brother, or you, sister, but I still get a sense of distance between you two. This kind of interaction doesn't have the slightest bit of an erotic atmosphere. Seems your relationship hasn't changed at all since our last meeting."

Subaru: "It's not like erotic flirting happens these days! And there's no need to bring up what happened in the capital, and my chest hurts so please stop!"

Subaru reacted to Felt in such a manner. Throughout the past year, serving as Emilia's knight, Subaru's self-awareness had increased to a sufficient point, and he was aware of the state of the relationship between them as man and woman.

In all honestly, their romantic relationship was probably at a lower point than it had been before Subaru had become her knight.

This was largely in part due to Emilia's mental age. Emilia's emotional maturity had yet to grow to a degree where she could accept Subaru's romantic advances on her. So her getting along with him was nothing too significant.

His love had not faded, but the intent behind his interactions with her had changed. As long as there was no change in Emilia's emotional awareness of him, their relationship would persist like this, intact.

At the least, Subaru understood that even if he took the first step, nothing would come of it.

Subaru: "Put it this way, this feeling might be something close to what Cruschan's relationship is going through."

Crusch: "My relationship, what?"

Subaru sighed absentmindedly and his hand rubbed against his jaw. Crusch looked over at him, wearing an incredulous expression.

Of course, she'd been bathing with the women, so she was also dressed in a bathrobe. The chest that her former men's clothing had hidden was emphasized by the thinness of the bathrobe.

Without her inspiring aura, Crusch's face had been both beautiful and innocent as she'd obeyed Ferris's guidance while putting on her yukata.

Crusch glanced to the side, as Subaru rubbed his nose with his fingers.

Subaru: "Yeah. Although Ferris is always clinging to Crusch-san, it could be said that they don't see each other as man and woman, right? And the starting point between you two is only a little bit before us, so maybe we go about treating the people we like the same way."

Crusch: "Well, it's a bit embarrassing when you say it like that. Haha. Right, Ferris?" Ferris: "Ferri-chan is devoted, even if Crusch-sama rejects my heart."

Crusch: "——"

For a moment, the room was frozen by what Ferris said.

Crusch's smile became stiff, and Ferris welcomed her response with a smile.

Incidentally, Ferris was dressed in a bathrobe as well, as if he was competing with the girls. Anyway, now wasn't the time to dwell on that.

Subaru: "I'm so sorry for revealing the secret that I dug up. Alright, I guess it's time to eat." Crusch: "Don't run away after digging up a bomb like that!"

Subaru tried to redirect the topic toward food, an idea which was immediately rejected by Crusch's cry.

This was really a problem, and Subaru wasn't expecting to have to encounter it. Hmm, what do to. He cast an uncertain gaze around.

Wilhelm: "Ferris. Take care to not scare Crusch-sama. Your lively and dangerous side feels more prominent than before."

Before the silence could become awkward, Wilhelm interjected, and the

mood shifted again.

The elderly man was the only man present in a bathrobe. It seemed that he'd been to the baths right after the women had left. Both his posture and yukata played their part in restoring the harmonious atmosphere from the its previous tenseness.

(Ferris is also a man though... uh?)

Ferris: "What, why would Wil-jii say that?"

Wilhelm: "A respectful love, a treasured love, a romantic love. Love is often taken for granted. Incurring confusion for the purpose of hiding your feelings is unpleasant for innocent hearts.

Should I not speak harshly about this?"

Ferris: "Ha nyah. Don't say it like that, that's a bit much."

Listening to Wilhelm's heavy sermons, Ferris muttered in a low voice and snuggled up against Crusch's shoulder.

Ferris: "It's okay. It was a obviously joke, so don't be so nyon edge. If Ferri-chan were to really upset Crusch-sama, it'd be a huge problem."

Crusch: "T-That's right, isn't it? Phew, I was a little scared since I was unused to it, but I appear to have misunderstood Ferris's thoughts."

Ferris: "—Not at all."

Crusch sighed in relief, and a fleeting emotion flashed through Ferris's eyes as he watched her, leaving Subaru feeling unsure.

That complex emotion was something that he could not easily reveal.

During this year, Ferris was the one who had to deal with his master's amnesia.

During that time, he must have tried his best but still felt anxious and guilty, just like Subaru. Even so, his master, lacking the foundation of her memory, had needed to rely on him, and so he could not show any confusion.

Joshua: "The preparations for dinner have been completed. It will be served, does anyone mind?"

As the conversation came to an end, the timing on behalf of the hotel's staff was perfect. Joshua, who had been sitting without presence in a corner until then, had a steady flow of food brought up by the manager.

Everyone watched as their meal was arranged on the long table, their gazes colored with wonder. However, Subaru had a different reason to be surprised than everyone else.

Emilia and others were surprised by the variety of dishes, many of which they'd never seen before, while Subaru was surprised by the sight of familiar dishes.

Since there was no sea in this world, it had been nearly impossible to find such a dish, but Subaru immediately fixed his attention on the sashimi dish before him. Subaru: "This, may I eat it as is?"

Anastasia: "I guess you're not accustomed to it, since you'd never experience this kind of dish

without living close to water. The Water Plumage Pavilion is actually famed for this."

Sashimi wasn't the only thing Subaru recognized. There was a variety of Japanese dishes placed together on the table. In the midst of all the confusion, Anastasia began to bring food to her mouth, and Subaru took that as a cue to start.

He immediately went for the fancy sashimi and soy sauce. Emilia and Beatrice, seated beside him, both issued an "ah!". Concerns about a species of parasite arose as he swallowed, but, taking into account the class of hotel and the host, it was hardly a plausible worry.

Instead, Subaru simply focused on enjoying the tastes.

Subaru: "Delicious! Ah, it's been so long since I've had sashimi!" Emilia: "I-It's delicious?"

Subaru: "It's not even a matter of delicious or not, since this is simply a proper delicacy. It's probably due to its freshness, but this probably makes the top of my list. If there's any sushi vinegar and rice here, I could show you guys how proper sushi is made."

Emilia: "Sorry. I don't understand what you're saying. But, I'm glad it's good."

Partially listening to Subaru's train-like speech, Emilia imitated him and dipped the sashimi into the soy sauce. As she tasted it, her amethyst eyes widened as she gripped her hands excitedly, exclaiming, "Mmmm!".

Looking at the reaction of the master and servant, the others also began to taste the food.

Anastasia, who disappointedly drew away, relaxed her gaze as she watched Subaru and Emilia, muttering to herself "Ahh, it's hopeless".

Despite some people having missed the dinner, the participants were able to enjoy themselves amidst their restlessness.

—On this night, with its bright moon, the compassionate and forgiving world allowed for this peace.

Chapter 14: The Sword Demon Under the Moon

The dinner party had been one where everyone had forgotten their hostilities.

After dinner, Subaru had retired to his room, where the staff had already made his bed. Looking at the two sets of quilts, placed side by side, Subaru felt his admiration for the hotel increase. It followed the Japanese custom where towels, blankets, quilts, and the like were all arranged when the resident had vacated their room.

Although, he'd always thought that such a practice left people feeling rather defenseless.

Beatrice: "Subaru. It looks like while we weren't here, people succeeded in sneaking into our room, in fact—!"

Subaru: "Ah. It looks like the quilts and towels you messed up were rearranged or replaced."

Beatrice: "That...! Yes, it's definitely a trap to tempt Betty, I suppose. They're hiding under a guise of thoughtfulness, in fact."

Subaru: "Sometimes people just have good intentions. Though, this service isn't free."

Beatrice carried herself with an unnecessary alertness and diligence even though she could barely keep her eyes open. Subaru quickly ushered her to bed.

Since officially forming their contract, Subaru and Beatrice had slept in the same bed. Although Anastasia had offered Beatrice her own room, she would just have left for Subaru's room anyway, so they'd respectfully declined.

That wasn't to say that Beatrice was a child who couldn't sleep alone. Rather, Beatrice used their nighttime contact with Subaru to sap the excess mana from his defective gate.

Beatrice: "So, Betty isn't here because she wants to be near Subaru, in fact. Don't misunderstand, I suppose."

Beatrice, who'd originally devised the terms of the contract, had spoken thusly.

But where her intent was no longer mattered. Subaru had long since become accustomed to falling asleep to the sound of someone else's breathing.

Beatrice: "...that green stuff was toxic, in fact. It's unforgivable, I suppose..."

Happy and tired, Beatrice buried herself in the quilts and promptly fell asleep thinking of the wasabi that had traumatized her at dinner.

Touching Beatrice's frowning forehead, Subaru took in her cute sleeping face until he was satisfied, then climbed to his feet.

Subaru: "Now then. I'm going to take a bath, too. Have a good rest."

Next to Subaru's pillow lay an unused bathrobe. If he hadn't known how to wear it, he could easily just ask a staff member. Of course, Subaru has worn yukatas in his original world and had no issue figuring out the garment.

Subaru: "If Ferris and Anastasia aren't there, I could also go decorate one of the women's bathrobes."

He of course wanted to seek out Emilia's bathrobe. The other Royal Election candidates were all lovely maidens, but if Subaru could tailor Emilia's clothing and dress her up then he could ensure she'd never be inferior to them in the slightest.

Subaru: "Well, it can't be helped. I guess I'll be satisfied that I got to do Emilia's three braids after dinner."

Although she'd let her hair down before bed, they'd launched a "three braids wave!" as they came undone, just as Subaru had planned. Naturally long hair that fell in waves, like Anastasia's, was also beautiful, but Subaru considered Emilia's long silver hair the most eye-catching.

Subaru: "The three braids and three braid wave are lovely. Emilia is definitely a shrewd woman. I could never do such a thing with Beatrice."

Beatrice's hair inexplicably never left its twintailed drills.

It was probably because she was an artificial spirit. Changing her hairstyle was possible, but it always reverted to its original form as soon Subaru's hands left her hair. It was so fascinating that he'd played with it a number of times.

While looking forward to the next morning, Subaru collected his bathrobe and made for the baths, treading carefully in order to not wake Beatrice. Thinking of the people whom he shared the hotel with, Subaru didn't feel the need to be alert. He rather pitied anyone who would dare to launch any type of scheme.

Reinhard: "Although I doubt that anything will happen, I will know if anything is amiss. I hope that everyone can spend the night peacefully."

Those were Reinhard's reassuring words as they'd left the dining room. The sense of safety wasn't just limited to the hotel, it extended to the entire region.

Knowing Reinhard, even feeling safe in the entire city wouldn't be a stretch.

So, for now, Subaru could wander the hotel without taking any precautions. Although it was regrettable that the hotel lacked an open-air bath, Subaru was still excited because he found bathing the most enjoyable part of any hotel stay.

Subaru: “——”

Subaru came to a stop, his relaxed expression shifting as he looked through a corridor into the courtyard, where Reinhard and Garfiel's battle had taken place. In the evening, its atmosphere was different, and rather pleasing.

A round moon floated in the dark sky, blanketed by thick clouds which gave the scene a glamorous charm. A cool wind blew through the garden, where a lone figure stood.

Subaru: “—Wilhelm-san?”

A sturdy back, and long white hair.

At a glance, Subaru could tell that the yukata-clad figure was elderly, and there was only one man he knew who fit the profile.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono, did I surprise you?”

Probably having been long aware of the movement behind him, Wilhelm turned to greet Subaru, a soft look in his eyes.

He stood with his hands tucked in the sleeves of the bathrobe. His posture,

combined with the Japanese style garden. Why was the image so perfectly natural?

Wilhelm: "Are you going to the baths next?"

Subaru: "Yes, that's what I was planning on doing. By the way, I came here to see the garden in the evening, not because I got lost since I'm unfamiliar with the hotel."

Wilhelm: "That wouldn't happen to Subaru-dono. I also came to indulge in the beauty of the garden, so I believe that I can understand Subaru-dono's mood."

Subaru: "...it's still embarrassing to be spoken of so highly."

Subaru turned away, embarrassed, as Wilhelm, without any trace of exaggeration, spoke of him with unflinching trust.

Wilhelm was the person who Subaru had grown to respect the most since coming to this world. There were people who he wanted to stand alongside, and people who he wanted to compete with, but the only person who Subaru looked at with nothing but respect was Wilhelm.

Both as a person and as a man, Wilhelm was Subaru's ideal.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono probably came here searching for the peace and solemnity of the garden at night. My presence here must be very frustrating."

Subaru: "Not at all. Rather, seeing the Sword Demon in this windy garden is so perfect that I want to forever engrave this image in my heart. I like seeing people who shine in the moonlight."

As far as Subaru was concerned, Emilia's beauty was undoubtedly the most commensurate with that of the moonlit night.

Her long silver hair was different from the glow of the sun. Emilia's beauty was like the illusory of the moonlight, and Subaru wanted to be the stars hovering around the moon.

So, seeing the Sword Demon standing under a moonlit night was a sight that Subaru had been longing to see.

Wilhelm: "...Subaru-dono shouldn't waste such heartfelt words on an old man like me. If you whispered them to the woman you love, you would surely capture her attention."

Subaru: "Putting on those airs would just be an insecticide to all the lovely butterflies I've attracted. And anyway, the one I want to say those words to wouldn't understand them."

Wilhelm: "Trying to bring out her flawless smile, searching for the perfect words... that anxious feeling is one of the pleasures of love, Subaru-dono."

Hearing Wilhelm's light tone, Subaru gave a relaxed shrug of his shoulders.

Subaru: "Oh? You seem to be referencing your faraway love story. Did you ever go through that, Wilhelm-san?"

Wilhelm: "Would you like to hear it?"

Subaru: "Be sure to tell me every detail."

Subaru gave a ceremonious, respectful bow, and Wilhelm's "it can't be helped" attitude was tinged with a look of joy.

Wilhelm: “When I was a young man, I was just as terrible with words as I am now. I never wanted to discuss anything other than swords, since I had no interests aside from swordplay. I must have bored my wife to no end when we first met.”

Subaru: “But, your wife didn’t dislike talking to that Wilhelm-san, right?”

Wilhelm: “She was an open-minded woman. Whether it be the loss of a heavy responsibility which burdened a heart, or escaping a duty, neglecting the thoughts of others, we never discussed any of those in our chats. She was born a gentle, warm person.”

Wilhelm closed his eyes with a wistful smile.

Subaru bent silently over the corridor, listening to the old man’s memories.

Wilhelm: “Because I was such an unsociable person, my wife always supplied the topics during our conversations. On top of that, I initially failed to notice how drawn I was to her. Whenever I spoke with her, I avoided facing the agitation in my heart.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san was really bad at talking to women, huh.”

Wilhelm: “Really, I gave everything to the sword. When I gripped my sword, I forgot about everything else, as if merely swinging my sword would give me a way of survival. —The one who reminded me of the reason I took it up was my wife.”

Subaru: “Is that when you realized you loved her?”

Wilhelm: “...you seem to have seen through me, Subaru-dono.” Wilhelm fell silent, and Subaru followed suit.

Wilhelm was surely unaware of the expression he currently wore. Subaru,

however, felt a strong wave of pride wash over him as he saw it.

The look in Wilhelm's eyes, the wrinkles on his face, the tone of his voice, were all legendary. The wife he loved just as strongly now as he had then, Theresia van Astrea.

The old man's expression, attitude, and very existence all generously sang of the love he held for his wife.

No matter who, anyone who saw him would, without doubt, instantly see that he was in love.

Even if everything in the world were to wither and fade, not a single person would fail to understand the depth of that emotion.

This was the depth of Wilhelm's love, clearly something that should be worn with pride. Subaru: "———"

As Subaru gazed upon Wilhelm's face, his eyes unconsciously welled with tears.

Unbearable feelings arose spontaneously, and gathered as heat in his eyes. He didn't know it had touched him so much. Why did his heart feel so warm upon seeing someone in love?

Crying in such a situation would only serve to bother Wilhelm.

Wilhelm: "Like Subaru-dono said, that was when I realized my feelings for my wife."

Subaru lowered his face, pretending to scratch his head as he hid his tears.

Although he should have noticed that Subaru had started crying, Wilhelm continued talking.

Was he just immersed in the past, or was he pretending not to notice Subaru's reaction? Subaru had no way of knowing, so he kept silent and continued to listen.

Wilhelm: "The sword was everything to me, but it was only one part of who I was. It was my wife who made me realize this obvious truth, and so every time I swing my sword, I'm reminded of her."

Subaru: "Is that, true even now?"

Wilhelm: "—That is truer now than it ever was." Wilhelm took a moment to formulate a response.

Finally, turning his back to the moonlight, Wilhelm turned to face Subaru. The feelings flashing across the old man's face were so complex that Subaru couldn't quite read them all.

Pride. Remorse. Hesitation. Enthusiasm. Shame. Courage.

—But those all stemmed from his love.

Wilhelm: "I try my best to keep holding my sword, so that I will continue to be reminded of my wife. Even death could not take her from my memory, and, when my time comes, I want to die with a sword in hand. I would be with her forever."

Subaru: "——"

This was Wilhelm's awkward, straightforward way of expressing the love that he couldn't otherwise.

Subaru swallowed, repeatedly taking deep breaths to loosen the pressure in his heart and the numbness in his tongue, until he finally judged himself as being able to speak again.

Subaru: “When I die and whatnot, please don’t talk about such things that have no sign whatsoever of happening. Wilhelm-san is definitely surely completely absolutely totally entirely even younger than super young, and so even thinking about your retirement is certainly going to trouble people.”

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono?”

Subaru: “Crusch and Ferris both are very dependent on Wilhelm-san. Crusch’s memory loss is a very serious issue, and Ferris who is supporting her hasn’t expressed this, but I’m sure he’s completely spent himself. So they’ll be a mess if Wilhelm-san doesn’t help! And, I too!”

Wilhelm: “——”

Subaru: “I also have many, many things I’d like to consult with Wilhelm-san. We’re obviously in hostile factions, so maybe that’s just naivete, but, I...”

Subaru truly liked Wilhelm.

Wilhelm, who had buried in his heart of hearts his love for his wife, and sought vengeance for her, was someone who Subaru truly respected. Even if that hadn’t happened, even if their relationship had remained just a ten-day mentorship, then Subaru would still have deeply respected Wilhelm’s strength and fortitude.

Hearing the Wilhelm that he respected so much speak of “death” was terrifying to Subaru.

Subaru was far more sensitive to the notion of the people he cared about dying. This was due both to his contract with Roswaal and to Subaru's own views on Return by Death shifting.

There was also a part of him who was always secretly worried about Emilia and Beatrice. Wilhelm: "...I am the just same as before, truly terrible with words."

Upon hearing Subaru's stubborn, desperate words, Wilhelm smiled.

The old man direct a warm look at Subaru, whose breaths were still shallow, and spoke.

Wilhelm: "It was terrible of me to have you worry so much. Despite my earlier words, I'm not always thinking of death. Although it's an inevitable truth, I've struggled through the hardest challenge already."

Subaru: "...Ah."

Subaru relaxed slightly as he came to a realization. Wilhelm was speaking of the White Whale.

Wilhelm had faced no small sacrifice in the battle against his fated enemy. At that time, he was surely aware of the possibility of his death. But, in the end, he had prevailed, and—

Wilhelm: "I think I'm in good condition. I fulfilled my dearest wish and survived, and now I can live free of shame."

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san..."

Wilhelm: "I did what I needed to do, and I think there is nothing more honorable than that. Then and now, aside from merely swinging my sword, my chest is shaking with the pursuit of a happiness. I have people who I've pledged my support to, and I've visited my wife's grave. I've received so many

blessings.”

Yes, that was it.

That was right. Wilhelm would not do anything unreasonable.

The old man’s steady, calm smile. Subaru, as someone who was young and superficial, had no way of seeing through it. But that smile was by no means a fake or ironic one.

Wilhelm was not unreasonable. And even in the unlikely event that this was the case, he wouldn’t have spilled a long-held burden to Subaru.

However, from the beginning, weren’t Subaru’s attempts to have Wilhelm reveal his thoughts just arrogance?

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono. —This is a virtue, but also a weakness.” Subaru: “.....”

Looking at the troubled Subaru, Wilhelm spoke quietly.

There was no smile in the voice, but there was no criticism either. Rather, the way he spoke was reminiscent of how an older person would caution a younger one.

Speaking more frankly, it was the tone a grandfather would take with his grandson.

Wilhelm: “My wife did this too, the bad habit of neglecting and shoving aside your own feelings as you focusing on those of the people around you.”

Subaru: “Bad habit, is it... No, I’m hardly such a good person. I don’t want anything like everyone’s happiness. I just want the people I’m close to to be happy.”

Wilhelm: “The range of the people who you consider close to you is also a problem. While it wasn’t what my wife desired, for a woman, she held a great amount of power, and could affect far more people than she ever wanted to.

Wilhelm’s wife, Theresia, was the previous Sword Saint.

Despite lacking common knowledge, Subaru had heard plenty about her in the past year. The civil unrest that took place in the kingdom of Lugunica, which came to be known as the Demi-Human War, had been single handedly ended by the Sword Saint.

What she had accomplished with her undue strength was the salvation of the country’s stability. Natsuki Subaru would never be able to compare with such a hero.

Subaru: “I understand, about your wife, but I can’t match up to her in any way.”

Wilhelm: “My wife was just an ordinary woman who admired flowers. Even if she’s a hero of legend, she didn’t always act as such. And Subaru-dono, your reputation is good, and your influence is wide. In the future, your range will surely increase, and you will be able to do more and more.”

Subaru: “This kind of thing...”

Wilhelm: “I am convinced that anything Subaru-dono cannot achieve alone, he will work together with others to do, and will become a great, accomplished

person.”

Subaru: “——”

Speechless.

Wilhelm had overestimated him by so much, and that had struck Subaru speechless. That he was someone who could do great things, could Subaru really believe this?

He was fragile and weak, his intellect was lacking, and his ideas were often poor and baseless. Because he was a person who could not do anything by himself, all he could ever do was rely on others to solve his problems.

That method was surely flawed. For now, he was barely struggling along, but eventually he could certainly face failure.

When that time inevitably arrived, Subaru had so many people to disappoint.

Wilhelm: “I apologize for bringing up the same things. It must trouble you to hear them over and over relentlessly.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san, I...”

Wilhelm: “There may not be many people conscious of it, but it’s something that everyone will come to understand one day.”

Subaru: “I'm just an immature little child who is clumsy at everything I do.”

Wilhelm: “Well, this immature little child who is clumsy at everything he does is one who I’m very fond of.”

After a moment, Wilhelm nodded in satisfaction.

Wilhelm: “And the people who think like this will surely increase from now on.” As if deeply touched by Wilhelm’s words, Subaru again fell silent.

Part of him was overwhelmed, and wanted to cast the notion from his mind. However, because the idea had come from none other than Wilhelm, Subaru could not give it up so easily.

In the depths of his heart, he couldn’t believe in himself to that extent. But he also couldn’t discard Wilhelm’s belief in him.

Subaru decided to keep the feelings he’d felt with him, until he’d worked through them.

He was very conscious of his own deficits. So any feelings, encouragement, or words, he’d decided to carry with him.

And that was how he decided to treat Wilhelm’s words.

Subaru, who was desperately sorting his feelings out, failed to notice Wilhelm’s tender gaze. Wilhelm: “I spoke too much and kept you here for a long time, my apologies.”

Estimating that Subaru was done grappling with himself, Wilhelm spoke up. Accepting it, Subaru judged that tonight’s scene would end soon.

Subaru: “Me too, I’m sorry for asking so much, but I really wanted to hear your love story with your wife.”

Wilhelm: “No, it’s been a long time since I’ve had the pleasure of talking about my wife. Lately, both Crusch-sama and Felix have been busy.”

Subaru: “In addition to hearing a love story, I’ve also gotten insight into how another faction operates!”

Wilhelm: “It’s a little bit excessively sentimental. Hearing an old man’s long ramble is incredibly boring.”

Wilhelm’s blue eyes lit with affection as he smiled lightly. Subaru didn’t notice the fleeting emotion and instead focused on what was just happening.

Initially, Wilhelm had stood alone in the garden.

He’d told Subaru that he’d come to appreciate the garden at night.

The best location for enjoying the view of the garden was the corridor where Subaru was currently standing.

In fact, standing where Wilhelm was meant that much of the garden’s moonlit landscape would be hidden.

Of course, Subaru may very well have been overthinking. But, if there were something else that would bring Wilhelm to the garden, then it would be,

Subaru: “...there, that’s where Reinhard stood.” Wilhelm: “——”

Wilhelm’s location, where he’d been standing all along, was the area that Reinhard and Garfiel had fought in.

That patch of gravel was where the handsome red-haired swordsman had stood, the very picture of unflinching immobility.

That Wilhelm had felt that sense of disturbance and had gone to confirm it would have been perfectly natural. However, only Wilhelm knew the reason that he had yet to leave that spot.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san. I don’t want to nose into another family’s affairs, and I’ve graduated from being the lively character who insists on hearing everything that’s happened just to satisfy my own curiosity, but...”

Wilhelm: “Ah, feel free to ask.”

Subaru: “Do you not get along with Reinhard? Even though you’re obviously family?”

The grandfather and grandson, and the complex relationships in the Astrea family.

Even understanding that he may have been undermining the trust that had built up between him and Wilhelm, Subaru still breached the subject.

He might have chosen not to do so had he not just spoken with Wilhelm in the garden. He watched Wilhelm’s profile, which overlooked his grandson's footsteps.

After their exchange, how could he refrain from asking? Wilhelm: “While speaking with Subaru-dono, I thought of it.” Subaru: “.....”

Wilhelm: “Why am I unable to speak these words to my own grandson?”

Those distressed words came straight from Wilhelm’s heart.

Wilhelm's face fell flat. He was expressionless, certainly not emotionless. He was suppressing his feelings to hide his lament behind a hard shell.

What Wilhelm now possessed was pure regret.

Wilhelm: "I am a man with a lot of remorse, but there are three in particular that I can do nothing about. One of them is the distance between me and my grandson."

Subaru: "But, doesn't Wilhelm-san regret it?"

Wilhelm: "Even regretting shouldn't be allowed. The criticisms I spoke to my grandson... to

Reinhard, were so harsh. It's something unforgivable, and stupid, that can't be fixed anymore."

Wilhelm, who was still hiding his feelings under a guise of expressionlessness, seemed to be burning with an emotion, a flame, that had consumed Wilhelm for years. It was one of both anger and regret, one that he had always clung to.

Wilhelm: "I used my crusade against my wife's murderer as an excuse to avoid facing that remorse, and, after successfully crushing the enemy, I recognize that I should begin to search for a way to reconcile."

Subaru: "But you lack the courage?"

Wilhelm: "I'm honestly so shameful. My grandson certainly resents me now. Thinking of this, I cannot take a step forward."

Wilhelm issued a deep sigh of disappointment, seeming to shrink in on himself. Subaru was dumbstruck, and, finally inadvertently managed a laugh.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono?"

Subaru: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh, that was inappropriate."

Wilhelm cast a disbelieving look at Subaru. Really, this old man, how many times would he surprise Subaru in one night?

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san seems to be thinking that he's unqualified to be Reinhard's grandfather..."

Wilhelm: "Well, yes. Compared to my grandson, I came to a standstill after realizing my mistakes. He's too kind to the cowardly person that I am..."

Subaru: "If you put it that way, then I can only see a grandfather who's afraid of being rejected by his grandson."

Wilhelm: "...huh?"

Wilhelm shook off his gloom and looked Subaru in the face. Subaru waved his hand, still fighting an impulse to laugh.

Subaru: "I don't fully understand the reasons for the poor relationship between Wilhelm-san and Reinhard, so I might be misunderstanding. But in the eyes of an outsider, Wilhelm-san wants to reconcile with Reinhard and looks like he really wants to apologize, so making an apology would be a good idea."

Wilhelm: "But Reinhard will not forgive me."

Subaru: "If he doesn't forgive you at first, keep apologizing until he does. You're not apologizing to be forgiven, you're apologizing to apologize, right? The person making the apology has nothing to worry about, because they're

not a bad person.”

Wilhelm: “——”

This time, it was Wilhelm’s turn to fall speechless at Subaru’s extreme words.

Of course, Subaru knew that his were very headstrong. Even so, he believed it was necessary to keep insisting.

In order to motivate Wilhelm. In order to let him face Reinhard.

Of course, after being alienated for so many years, a sudden apology would initially be thought of as “what’s going on with this guy?”. However, if many apologies were made, then “what's going on with this guy?” would give way to either “there’s no helping it, then” or “ugh, this guy’s too annoying”.

Wilhelm: “I think things would deteriorate.”

Subaru: “But at least they’ll change. Don’t you think that any change is better than being stuck in the worst-case scenario your situation seems to be in?”

It was universally acknowledged that Subaru had made an awful initial impression. Breaking through interpersonal barriers was nothing to Subaru.

Subaru: “After a few years, if you give him some pocket money, you could immediately soften his attitude toward you. Although the impression of you may be poor, if you do something nice for him, won’t he come to think of you as a nice person? Reinhard is incredible to deal with, and even I unexpectedly became his friend right away.”

Wilhelm: “But... it won’t be that simple with Reinhard...”

Subaru: “—Reinhard said he wanted to hear about the battle with the White

Whale.” Subaru spoke in a humorous tone, and, bit by bit, Wilhelm seemed to relax.

Subaru told Wilhelm of what Reinhard had said outside of the tea room. After listening to his story, Wilhelm suddenly opened his blue eyes.

Subaru: “I don’t know if the White Whale is related to your poor relationship, but if it is, then Reinhard’s definitely concerned about it. Of course, he’s certainly heard of how Wilhelm-san crushed the White Whale, and I’m sure he wants to know about how you avenged his grandmother after ten years.”

Wilhelm: “——”

Subaru: “That guy is surely also looking forward to changing your stiff relationship right now.” Subaru had no way of knowing Reinhard’s intentions.

Subaru had always seen Reinhard as a man who was ridiculously perfect beyond perfect, and had never associated him with powerlessness or ignorance before.

But those were flawed ideas. Reinhard was also human. He had worries just like anyone else.

Even the man Subaru had regarded as superhuman, Wilhelm, was, beneath the surface, an ordinary man and ordinary grandfather, filled with ordinary troubles and shortcomings.

It would be no surprise if the same held true for Reinhard.

Subaru’s words just now had surprised Wilhelm, who closed his eyes as if he were meditating on them. Time seemed to be flowing by with the still wind.

Then, after a moment of silence between the two, Wilhelm reopened his eyes. Wilhelm: “My grandson... Reinhard would listen to me.”

Subaru: “Annoy him with a hello first and bounce back if he rejects you. That’s happened to me with every girl I’ve met aside from Emilia.”

Wilhelm: “Really—”

After hearing Subaru’s reply, Wilhelm shook his head.

Then, the old man looked up, leaning his head back and fixing his eyes on the moon hanging in the sky.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono is invincible.”

The words were spoken with the hint of a smile.

Chapter 15: A Deafening Silence

The next morning, a bleary-eyed Subaru stood in the sunlit courtyard. Feeling the hard gravel and sand through his shoes, he took a deep breath of the cool morning air.

Emilia directed a smile at the pleased Subaru as he gave a relaxed, “mmm!”.
Emilia: “What is it? Subaru seems happy today, did something nice happen?”

Subaru: “Many nice things happened. An important event happened last night, Emilia’s charming three braids were an unexpected treat, and the baths were spacious and comfortable.”

Emilia: “Ah, I can say the same. I also took a very comfortable bath yesterday. The bathhouse in the Roswaal Mansion is great, but the bath surrounded by stones here is so fresh.”

Last night, the beauty of Emilia’s melodiously flowing silver hair, as the three braids Subaru had made swayed, had been breathtaking. Although her usual long straight hair also showed her frosty, snow-like beauty, seeing an unusual hairstyle on her had its own sense of privilege.

Anyway, Emilia, whatever she looked like, was always equally appealing.

With that in mind, Subaru turned his attention back to the present as Emilia spoke again.

Although indoors, the bath went as far as it could to resemble an open-air bath, and the decorations evoked a natural image of the outdoors. Cobblestone covered the ledges along the bath’s wall. If it had been marble instead, the bath would have lost much of its uniqueness.

Emilia: “Since I saw this type of bath for the first time, I ended up having a lot of fun frolicking with Crusch-san and Felt-chan.”

Subaru: “That’s a prime fanservice scene from a galgame. It's a CG that’s absolutely necessary to collect.”

Emilia: “C... G?”

Subaru: “It’s nothing, I was just teasing you. You seem happy, are you?”

Emilia: “Mm, very.”

Emilia, whose happiness was shared with Subaru, also seemed at a glance, joyful, and this feeling alleviated the initial anxiety and suspicion that had accompanied their trip to Pristella. The issue was—

Subaru: “Those two over there have such unhappy, gloomy looking faces.”

Beatrice: “...it's nothing, in fact.”

Otto: “Please don’t mind me... hic. I just had a little, hic, too much to drink.”

Standing where Subaru was pointing was a loli with a frosty expression on her face, and a man whose usually elegant features were pale.

Needless to say, these two were Beatrice and Otto. After some careful consideration, Subaru decided to say hello to the almost transparent Otto.

Subaru: “Otto. You were a no-show at dinner yesterday, where’d you go?”

Otto: “Like I said when we parted ways, hic, it’s rare for me to have a chance to come to Pristella, and while, hic, we’re here, I wanted to establish some connections.”

Subaru: “What’s up with you? You’re even more drunk than you were when we first met.”

Otto: "...? My memory might be messed up, but, hic, my first meeting with Natsuki-san didn't seem to involve alcohol..."

Subaru: "Well, it's your own memory, so think what you will."

Otto, who was reproached for an unknown reason, wore a helpless expression, although Subaru's comments were all moot.

From Subaru's perspective, he had numerous first meetings with Otto, but his first one was with a frustrated Otto in a tavern, who had been as equally pale as the current one. Shortly afterwards, however, Subaru had returned from death. Therefore, from Otto's point view, their first meeting had been the embarrassing one in which Subaru had been responsible for saving him from the Witch Cult.

Of course, it was futile to argue, since both would be wrong.

Subaru: "Don't do things that would give Beako bad habits. Well, I can understand that you were in a rush to help our faction."

Otto: "I did this all of my own volition. —Even though I have no idea why I did this to myself."

Otto, whose head seemed to be feeling rather heavy, was unable to respond to Subaru. After a moment he looked up at the courtyard, changing the course of the conversation with an "actually...",

Otto: "What happened to Garfiel? It's rare to not see him up at this time. Isn't it convention for him to get up earlier than anyone earlier so he can find the highest location to yell from?"

Subaru: "There's probably not anywhere high up here, but that isn't why he's not here. Though, that would be his own juvenile secret. Please be gentle with

him the next time you meet.”

Otto: “To someone who has no idea whatsoever as to what happened, aren’t those words too misleading!? ...ahh, my head still hurts.”

Subaru: “You’re certainly self-destructive.”

Watching a night-comatose Otto collapse onto the floor, Subaru smiled. He then turned around and looked at Beatrice, who had been silent since the beginning of their exchange.

Subaru: “So, what about, Beako? Yesterday, you were so lively, but now you’re all gloomy. That’s so uncute.”

Beatrice: “Don’t just assume things, I suppose. I’m not feeling gloomy, in fact. Betty just suddenly remembered a few things, which she has to carefully scrutinize, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What's the matter? If you have any trouble, spit it out. If it’s something dangerous, one person might not know how to handle it.”

Surprised at what Beatrice had said, Subaru narrowed his eyes slightly and gave a gesture indicating his readiness. Emilia also nodded as if she were listening carefully.

Beatrice bit her lips, revealing a rare hesitation, before choosing her words with a pompous air. Beatrice: “It started yesterday, after Subaru abandoned me to play with Garfiel, in fact.” Subaru: “A questionable interpretation, but go on.”

Beatrice: “Betty had gone to look for Emilia to kill time with, I suppose. On the way to her room, I ran into an employee, who I made a little bit of small talk with, in fact.”

Subaru: “Beako... making small talk...!?”

Learning that Beatrice's ability to communicate had improved somewhat left

Subaru speechless. He turned to Emilia, shocked, and she gave an eager nod.

Incredible! The notion of Beatrice initiating conversations with strangers was entirely unexpected. Maybe the freshness of travel had let Beatrice experience an unexpected growth.

After returning home, he needed to update the “Beako’s Growth Diary” with this development as soon as possible.

The diary, which recorded the Beako’s daily growth, had already reached three volumes. Thanks to this journey, he could add a new page.

Unaware that her daily activities were being recorded, Beatrice found Subaru and Emilia’s attention annoying, and always reacted with a dissatisfied “You’re exaggerating, I suppose!”.

Beatrice: “I’ll keep talking, in fact. When the waiter saw Betty, he said he had news and put on a very mysterious expression, I suppose. He told me, ‘At night, something scary will haunt this hotel’, in fact.”

Subaru “.....”

Beatrice: “Honestly, when Betty heard she hesitated to tell anyone so as not to create unnecessary confusion, I suppose. Although, I still decided to do some preparation last night as a precaution, in fact...”

Beatrice’s voice rose as she became worked up, and she didn’t notice how Subaru had fallen silent. Then, she dropped her voice to a whisper, as ceremoniously as if she were spreading a little known secret.

Beatrice: “In the middle of the night, Betty heard something strange, I suppose. I didn’t want to wake up Subaru, who had a stupid expression on his face as he slept, so I quietly left our sleeping quarters alone to investigate, in fact.”

Subaru: "You shouldn't stare at someone else's sleeping face."

Beatrice: "O-Of course I didn't stare, I suppose! I just gave a glance, as a lady's etiquette dictates, in fact!"

She might not have looked at the sleeping Subaru at all, but it was so cute that Subaru put the matter aside for time being.

Beako took Subaru's acquiescence as a sign to continue, and her mysterious expression reappeared.

Beatrice: "Betty found an unusual presence hovering near the hotel, so I tracked it, I suppose. After a while, I finally found its source on the front porch..."

Subaru: "You found it?"

Beatrice: "Well, there was a dangerous pale face slowly emerging from the darkness, I suppose. It seemed to be besieging Betty, so she confronted it, in fact."

Beatrice's petite forehead shone faintly with sweat, as if she were fully immersed in the grim situation she'd been in last night. Although Subaru didn't understand how a spirit's sweat glands worked, it made the atmosphere rather tense, so he chose to not comment on it.

Beatrice: "Shortly after, probably due to its fear of Betty's power, the figure slowly melted back into the darkness, I suppose. After repeatedly confirming that there would be no trouble later, Betty returned to the room, in fact. Then I stepped over the idiotically sleeping Subaru to return to bed, I suppose."

Subaru: "Don't peep on someone sleeping, it's indecent."

Beatrice: “I only confirmed that you were okay, I suppose! Absolutely no such thing like touching your forehead or eyebrows happened, in fact!”

This was certainly a self-admission, but because it was so cute, Subaru again neglected to mention it.

All in all, that seemed to be the end of Beatrice’s horror story. Subaru held his chin and nodded slightly as he began to consider what she had said.

A strange event had happened at the inn.

The incredible, strange things in this world were hardly few in number. Actually, after spending a year in the parallel world, he could navigate its strangeness fairly well. For example, using common sense, he could conclude that no ghosts existed in this place.

As far as common sense goes, even calling this a haunting seemed to be a poor assertion.

Even so, that kind of weird rumor still existed here, and that the hotel had even inherited a story about Japanese-style spirits was really rather incredible.

Subaru heartily admired this phenomenon, as he took a conclusive breath. Subaru: “So, what happened last night, Otto?”

Otto: “Ah, I remember now. As I lay on the porch, still on the verge of vomiting, I noticed that Beatrice-chan was staring at me, but I was unable to speak at the time. Finally, I couldn’t hold back and went to vomit in the bushes, and once I’d come back, she’d vanished.”

Subaru: “That would be it, then.”

Beatrice: “...how is this, how is it possible, in fact?”

It was almost too much for Beatrice to handle.

It was, at this point, incredibly obvious that the true face of the so-called specter was actually a drunk Otto, and she had no idea what to say.

What she'd been certain she'd seen was relentlessly denied, and Beatrice looked as if her ability to reason had vanished. Subaru stroked her as though comforting her, but in his heart he concluded that Beatrice was bad at sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings.

The waiter, who described the specter to Beatrice, had surely seen that Beatrice was the epitome of someone who was gullible, and would take any kind of prank too seriously.

Her red face, full of remorse and dissatisfaction, was so adorable that Subaru gave it the highest level of praise.

Felt: "Yo, everyone's gathered here already." A light female cut into the crowd of laughter.

Looking to the source of the sound, Subaru spotted a figure in the corridor; a girl shaking out her short, golden hair, Felt.

She had replaced the bathrobe with her usual light attire, swinging her slender arms with ease, looking more or less like a girl from the streets.

Subaru: "Morning. You're dressed so casually, I can just feel Reinhard's lament."

Felt: “Don’t preach about it, that guy annoys me with it so much, and even Rom-jii is on his side. It’s such a bother.”

Voicing her dissatisfaction, an impatient Felt leapt from the corridor and landed beside Otto, who wasn’t paying much attention to what was going on. She then turned towards Subaru and crooked her head to ask,

Felt: “Having said that, there’s a thing that I’ve been curious about.” Subaru: “What is it?”

Felt: “Ah, that is to say, why have you all been doing this weird dance together?”

Felt wore a curious expression as she watched Subaru’s strange dance — his radio gymnastics.

Whether before starting a long journey, or taking a few steps on the road, everyone would start their morning with radio gymnastics.

This scene had long appeared every morning in not only the Roswaal Mansion, but across the entirety of the Mathers territories.

Subaru: “Oh, it’s just the secret to health and longevity. Performed by everyone, from the children to the elderly, the age of the popular 'radio gymnastics' of healthiness will reign. After Emilia-tan becomes the king, our radio gymnastics will become a government mandated morning activity!”

Emilia: “Yeah, I'd be happy if everyone could do it together.”

Felt: “That’s... I can’t help but feel that if such a thing becomes reality, the king’s reputation will be ruined...”

Scrutinizing their movement, Felt muttered her cynical thoughts.

It was saddening to see, but sooner or later, even those who hadn't wanted to follow along were drawn into it after realizing the benefits of this easily performed activity.

The popularity of this movement after it has spread to the various villages was indeed high.

Subaru: "Beako and Otto were also reluctant from the very beginning, but now they even participate despite having suffered through a lonely night of fear, or a morning of a hangover!"

Beatrice: "Betty was dragged into this by Subaru, in fact."

Otto: "I obviously just wanted to sleep off my headache, but then I heard the claps and saw the dancing..."

Beatrice: "Even if I've become sick of this, I'm addicted." Otto: "Utterly fascinating."

Beatrice and Otto gave a somewhat weak explanation, while Subaru and Emilia stood proud. Felt scratched her white neck as she pondered the two distinctly different sets of responses.

Felt: "Indeed, I often hear of popular, strange activities happening in sister's vicinity. Strange dances, hollowed out pumpkins, women carefully baking food for their beloved as a gift. Ah, it's like that."

Subaru: "Although now they're only unique occurrences in the border territories, I know that one day it will be turned into a nationwide popularization project. Considering this, we could try using Anastasia-san in our schemes."

Valentine's Day would revolutionize the snack industry, and the markets

would broaden. If the topic of large economical shift came up, Anastasia would immediately find a way to capitalize on it.

If it wasn't too late, Subaru considered catching Anastasia when she was free to discuss those opportunities with her.

Felt: "Has brother always given off that kind of feeling?"

Emilia: "Well, Subaru has always been that way. It seems like he's teasing, but he really wants to improve things, even if he pretends he's always joking."

Felt: "Yeah but, you don't even know if he's joking or not until the dust settles ..."

Emilia's answer slightly flustered Felt.

Occasionally this kind of thing would happen due to Emilia's spiritual age. For her, seeing eye to eye with Felt was like a child trying to look an animal in the eyes.

Felt, who struggled and crawled her way up in slums, also had her unique way of living. Emilia: "Why is Felt-chan all alone, isn't Reinhard worried when you're not together?"

Felt: "I'm not some kid who needs to be taken care of, and besides, that guy is just annoying when he's near me, so I just told him to go off somewhere, since sister and everyone else would be here. It's so annoying, as soon as anything happens, that guy arrives in the blink of an eye."

Emilia: "Right. Then I feel at ease."

Emilian carelessly chuckled at Felt's complaint. Receiving a response which didn't match her expectations, Felt gave an anxious sigh and began playing

roughly with her blonde hair.

Emilia: “Felt-chan, you have such beautiful hair, you shouldn’t play with it so crudely. I’ve been taught by Subaru and Frederica-san to respect hair.”

Felt: “Damn, you’re so bossy... let me mind my own hair, and didn’t I say to stop adding ‘-chan’

to my name? It gives me goosebumps!”

Emilia: “Even if you say so, I can’t drop this habit all at once. I’ll try my best, but if I can’t hold back, I’ll be very sorry. Is that fine?”

Felt: “It’s not fine in the slightest!”

Because Emilia didn’t hold any maliciousness, Felt could only give a low, cat-like growl to vent her irritation.

Simply on the surface level, people hearing their conversation would smile, as their exchange resembled a secret language between best friends.

Subaru: “Well, our radio gymnastics are done, so feel free to go to bed. Or you could take a bath, they’re nice and refreshing.”

Otto: “I’d already taken a bath... but, sadly, the smell of alcohol didn’t seem to wash away.”

Subaru: “Before Garfiel shows up to yell at you, you’d best hurry up and wash it away. In my hometown, there’s a saying that any issue can be solved with a few hot baths.”

Subaru reached out a hand to the weak Otto as he finished speaking.

Otto: “It would be a catastrophe if he saw me like this... since you gave me your advice, I’ll follow it while I still have my life...”

Subaru lifted Otto to his feet and gave his weak shoulder a pat. Otto sighed, still despondent, as Subaru gazed up at the sky.

A sky full of smiles. Thin clouds hung in the early morning sky, reflecting the calm weather. Just as Subaru came to note this,

???: “Good morning, citizens of Pristella.” Subaru: “Huh!?”

A loud sound seemingly appeared out of thin air, echoing in everyone’s ears, surprising the unprepared Subaru.

It wasn’t an illusion; as Subaru looked around in panic, he saw Emilia, Felt, and Beatrice also glancing around, alarmed.

Subaru: “Hey, what's this? It’s a really loud voice.”

Felt: “It’s not some kind of fantasy, it’s just a loud voice in the streets...”

Felt whispered softly to herself, while Subaru also made his own commentary, while suspecting that this wasn’t unrelated to magic.

Speaking of magic that could send sound to an entire group of people, Subaru recalled the chain magic that Julius used to connect everyone’s consciousness.

Ultimately, however, it was simply a way of connecting people mentally in a limited range, and couldn’t deliver sound directly to the ears.

Pondering this, Subaru thought that he’d found a suitable answer. That was, Subaru: “Something like a loudspeaker?”

Felt and Subaru had provided similar comments on the phenomenon.

Resounding the sky, the noise was loud enough that the entire city could probably hear it, in a very similar way to announcements made from a loudspeaker.

The only problem was that in this world, there had yet to be any sign of such a scientific and technological development.

Otto: “Ah, you didn’t know? This radio functions with the help of a mana-powered instrument in Pristella’s Metropolitan Government Hall.”

Subaru: “Mana... so it’s magic!”

Otto answered Subaru’s question, nodding as if to say, “yes”.

Otto: “What I heard yesterday, when I was drinking with a great variety of people, was that every morning the city hall’s magically amplified radio would make an announcement to the citizens of Pristella.”

Subaru: “Huh, that’s such a strange daily routine.”

Otto: “Information that needs to be conveyed to all of the city’s areas can be heard immediately and conveniently. In the event of an emergency, evacuations or directions can be given easily. In order to keep such a stressful time from being too chaotic, doing this every morning allows the citizens to get used to the speaker.”

Subaru: “Oh... I wouldn’t have thought of that.” Using a magical device to prepare for emergencies.

Small villages were trouble enough, but if an accident took place in the city, handling it would quickly become a pandemonium. The preemptive countermeasure that had been taken to prevent this also had practical use.

It was unusual and fairly innovative for someone to take the time to ensure

that the citizens would be well prepared for it.

Subaru: “It looks like a pretty smart guy is responsible for this, maybe the mayor?”

Otto: “No, since the device runs on mana, it requires mana stones to fuel, so Kiritaka is most likely responsible for the radio.”

Subaru: “Oh...”

His admiration was suddenly interrupted by that impact.

Kiritaka was most likely the one who’d yelled “Don’t touch my Liliana!” yesterday. Scenes of the negotiation flashed through Subaru’s mind. The screaming. The flash of the magical stone. The elegant man who’d cried for Liliana afterward.

Subaru: “No, no.”

Beatrice: “No way, in fact.” Emilia: “That seems a little...”

At Subaru, Beatrice, and Emilia’s perfect synchronization, Otto smiled wryly.

Otto: “I thought that you’d reply like this, but the one who manages the radio is in fact Kiritaka. Listen, isn’t that voice familiar?”

Kiritaka: “This is a magical device which can transmit my voice throughout the entire city. If I startled anyone unfamiliar with this, I offer my apologies. You’re very lucky to be hearing this broadcast today.”

Subaru: “Who’s that?”

Despite Otto’s follow up, Subaru still had difficulty associating this voice with his impression of Kiritaka. He was so serious that it didn’t sound like a lolicon at

all.

Subaru: “No, wait. Clind-san also doesn’t seem like a degenerate... could it be that lolicons are clever at disguising themselves? Lolicons with social status are terrifying.”

Subaru again recalled the omnipotent butler.

He had overwhelming intelligence and ability, but it was mixed with that kind of irrational nature. Although it wouldn’t be quite right to call Clind a representative of all lolicons, it wasn’t impossible that there would be case of a high-class lolicon who resembled him.

Subaru: “Well, this Kiritaka guy is still very suspicious, and impressions from voices aren’t the most reliable...”

Kiritaka: “And to those who are listening, allow me to deliver, filled with my feelings... no! Filled with your feelings, a world of blessings! The morning has finally come... this is the Songstress Liliana, please be sure to listen!”

Liliana: “Ah, it’s me.”

In the midst of this mess, the man of Subaru’s memories and the man making the broadcast finally aligned.

This bother had decided to plague Subaru even in the early morning. He heard the shuffling sound of people changing locations, and then a slight cough which seemed to contain a smile.

Liliana: “Well~, hello everybody, this is Liliana, who was just introduced. Doing this every morning makes me feel the weight of expectation, but I still want to do my best to sing and play to create joy. Please oblige me.”

Subaru immediately recognized Liliana’s characteristic way of speaking, and

felt as if he could see her odd behavior even through the magical device,

Curiously, unlike Kiritaka’s voice, which intermittently faded though the magic radio, not a trace of Liliana’s voice was lost.

Subaru didn’t know if there was such a concept as magical device affinity, but if there were such a thing, it would suit the girl whose voice shared the name Goddess of Song to be able to sing clearly through the static.

Liliana: “Well, I’m eager to sing. Please listen — “The Sword Demon’s Love Song, Act Two”! Liliana inhaled gently as she prepared instrument for playing.

The song’s title stole Subaru’s attention from Liliana’s speech. If the song was indeed the tale of what he thought it was, then—

The song about to be played was the touching tragic love story about a demon, a woman, and a sword.

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The Songstress Liliana’s act of terrorism ended with her song, and Subaru returned to the living room for an early breakfast.

To be honest, the existence of the “The Sword Demon’s Love Song” had struck Subaru like an unexpected bolt of lightning.

He should have realized long ago. No matter in which world, at any time, any heroic deeds would be preserved for future generations.

They could be documented in a number of ways, such as in writing or paintings.

It wasn't inconceivable that the heroine who had ended a civil war and the Sword Demon who took that heroine as his wife were immortalized in song.

Of course, even if Subaru is aware of this possibility, he couldn't have done anything about what happened this morning. He hadn't even known about the magic device, and he couldn't have known to tell Liliana to think about her actions.

Now, he could only curse the Songstress who'd chosen her song at the most inopportune time without any regard for the situation.

His already poor impression of the Songstress had somehow plummeted even further at her inexplicably poorly timed enthusiasm. Liliana was an idiot, Kiritaka was a fool.

Subaru: "Has Wilhelm-san... come here yet?"

The earliest to arrive in the living room were the previous occupants of the courtyard, with the exception of Felt, who had parted with them after leaving. She'd probably come later together with Reinhard.

Thinking of the song he'd just heard, recalling Wilhelm's thoughts on his wife and grandson, and picturing the old man's smile, Subaru was unable to suppress the feelings that sprung up in his chest.

As for the words to say upon seeing him, Subaru had no idea how to find them. Even so, as long as there was communication, Subaru would be glad. Still, he seriously hoped that Wilhelm had somehow missed the song.

Subaru: "That group of overly serious people, it's impossible that all of them would be sleeping in on the same day."

The three main members of Crusch's faction, even Ferris, worked and rested on a balanced schedule. Even having lived with them only a few days, Subaru was well aware of this.

On a journey to an unfamiliar place, they'd probably be nervous and maintain their schedule even more rigorously, so it was impossible that they would have missed the broadcast.

Emilia: "Subaru, you look awful, what's wrong?"

Emilia leveled her gaze at Subaru, who sat on a cushion, rapidly tapping his feet in anxiety.

After the broadcast had ended, Subaru had immediately proposed that their faction should go to the tea room. After confirming that the tea room was empty, he claimed its undisturbed peace.

Emilia and the others simply savored the tragic lyrics of "The Sword Demon's Love Song" and indulged in Liliana's voice. They were unaware that the Sword Demon in the song was Wilhelm, or of any of the origins of the Sword Demon.

Therefore, Subaru was reluctant to have them share his anxiety.

Even more frightening was that Liliana's song had even captured Subaru.

Subaru, who'd been plagued with a sense of trepidation upon hearing the song's title, couldn't bring himself to leave courtyard while listening to it. Or, rather, that kind of thought hadn't even surfaced.

Liliana's singing had to have contained magic. Because of this, even after recovering, Subaru couldn't shake off a sense of anxiety when thinking of that hasty brunette.

Subaru: "...it's nothing... nothing, nothing, just, I'm a little hungry... you see, even though the inn's food is delicious, isn't it a little lacking in quantity? My body wants me to pilfer snacks so I can eat them and grow..."

Emilia: "Subaru, I don't believe you."

The usually gullible Emilia saw right through Subaru's bluff at this critical moment. Was he so easy to read? Subaru's confidence vanished.

Otto: "Really, Natsuki-san. Although I don't know what you're anxious about, we're discussing our plans for the afternoon. You should be paying attention."

Subaru: "This afternoon's plan, oh yeah, the second negotiation with Kiritaka. Hmm... we could take Liliana hostage so we can exchange her with the magic stone we want?"

Otto: "Why in the world would you propose such a forceful plan!?"

Otto, amazed by Subaru's words, raised his voice as his face adopted a gloomy expression. Seeing that, Subaru tilted his head with an "eh".

Perhaps it was due to his still burning the anger toward Liliana, but it probably wouldn't serve to raise the plan's success rate.

Otto: "In any case, this afternoon, we'll be attempting negotiations with Kiritaka-san again, and the one we should try to win the trust of is that member of The Scales of the White Dragon, who is the mostly likely to be able to persuade Kiritaka-san.

Subaru: "The Scales of the White Dragon, that's such a cool name. Was he at the meeting yesterday?"

Otto: “Yes, the Scales of the White Dragon is a well-known mercenary group in this area. Although they were established a long time ago, they were recently hired as a private force by Kiritaka-san. That man was their representative.”

Subaru: “Of the people who were there... ah, he’s probably the best person to talk to.”

While they hadn’t been there to observe the room the negotiation had taken place in, Subaru had a vague recollection of the presence of a middle-aged man in white before the magic stone’s light had engulfed him.

Kiritaka was mad for Liliana who was often in a state of madness herself. Subaru was certainly eager to talk to someone more rational than the two.

Otto: “Judging by this morning’s broadcast, Kiritaka-san’s anger should have calmed down somewhat, and he should be willing to listen to us, but if Natsuki-san is going to be present, then he would mostly likely be significantly less reasonable.”

Subaru: “I know my scary eyes put people off the first time they see me, but I didn’t expect such an aggressive reaction. That kinda hurt.”

Emilia: “That doesn’t matter, Subaru. I don’t dislike fierce looking eyes. My mother also had very fierce eyes, but she was such a gentle person.”

Beatrice: “Subaru’s face isn’t that bad, in fact... actually, I was mistaken, I suppose.” Subaru: “No comfort is preferable, actually. Don’t make me face the truth.”

Subtle bore the gentle and stern words before urging Otto to continue. Otto went on saying, “So,”

Otto: “During today's negotiations, I think Natsuki-san shouldn't accompany

us. Is that okay?"

Subaru: "No matter what, I don't have a choice but to agree, but if you succeed, then what's the point of my being here?"

Otto: "Between just Natsuki-san having come for nothing and all of us having come for nothing, we're choosing the smaller loss of just Natsuki-san, who only runs around playing with Beatrice-chan."

Beatrice: "I feel like you're underestimating Betty, in fact! It's annoying, I suppose!"

Beatrice's anger was dismissed and their plan of action was finalized. Nevertheless, Subaru had also considered what Otto was likely thinking.

Subaru: "This afternoon I'll go with Emilia to take a walk with Beako." Emilia: "Ehh? I won't be going to see Kiritaka-san with Otto-kun?"

Otto: "They've surely anticipated that we would likely come to negotiate again, and if we were to take Emilia-sama, we would be making an unannounced sudden visit, and we will fail just as we did yesterday... Natsuki-san, I'm glad you realize this, but I can't help but think that you're up to something."

Otto glared Subaru, who responded with an innocent whistle.

He had told Otto about meeting Liliana yesterday, but he'd neglected to mention where they'd met. Kiritaka had wanted to keep Emilia's faction from meeting Liliana, so he'd probably sent her out, and she'd chosen a nice scenic park to find refuge in.

Subaru: "I found a nice park, and I'd like Emilia to accompany me there. We could take stroll with Beatrice holding our hands between us."

Emilia: "Wow, that sounds like fun. But, I wonder if it's okay for us to be relaxing like that. Well, Otto-kun?"

Otto: “I can’t refuse if you stare at me with those eyes. Well, Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama both can’t go due to a variety of circumstances, so I’ll go with Garfiel. Please don’t cause any trouble.

In affirmation of Otto’s words, Emilia and Subaru nodded earnestly. But Subaru also stuck his tongue out at Otto’s back as an apology.

Liliana would almost certainly not be present at the Muse Chamber of Commerce today. In that case, Subaru could only assume that she would go to the same park as yesterday.

If she wasn’t there, Subaru would accept that there was nothing he could do, but he still wanted to establish a relationship with her if he could.

If Kiritaka truly loved Liliana from the bottom of his heart, there was quite a large possibility that he’d agree to a direct request from her.

Of course, he couldn’t just think of using Liliana. If he abused her good intentions, Emilia would oppose it, and Subaru’s own conscience wouldn’t let him walk free. Thus, Subaru decided to

tell Liliana his story without any reservations.

Subaru hoped that the result would be honest, even if it strayed from the heroic biography that she’s been expecting and disappointed her.

Immortalized in history as a hero by a song. Just the thought gave Subaru goosebumps, but if he had to add fuel to the fire, he wanted to leave an honest impression.

At the very least, Subaru’s famed so-called heroic deeds would also be disillusioned when his audience learned of his miserable mistakes along the way.

Anastasia: “—Good morning. You’re all up early.”

Just as Emilia's faction decided on their internal and external plans of action, the door of the tearoom was opened, revealing the figure of Anastasia. Today's Anastasia wore her usual fox scarf coupled with a kimono.

It was indeed a surprise to suddenly see a kimono, and Subaru was excited. Emilia's eyes gleamed for a different reason, she was delighted to see the clothing. Anastasia gazed at them with pride.

Anastasia: "Very nice, very nice. I'm glad to be shocking people so early in the morning."

Emilia: "Anastasia-san, that dress is so beautiful. Is that what you were talking about yesterday?"

Anastasia: "Yep. This is the kimono I mentioned at bath yesterday. Although it looks a lot like a bathrobe, it takes a lot of preparation to wear."

Anastasia turned delightedly, showing off her blue-dyed clothing, which was charmingly patterned with floating, scattered petals.

—Kararagi apparently shared much of Subaru's familiarity with Japanese culture. Subaru: "That type of clothing, has it been handed down since the days of Hoshin?"

Anastasia: "Well, you're quite knowledgeable, Natsuki-kun. This type of clothing did seem to appear more frequently since the beginning of the Hoshin's era. Although, that method of production was lost, and only reproductions are currently made."

Subaru: "Hoshin's era."

This man, "Hoshin of the Wastelands", appeared once again. Now, Subaru had no choice but to suspect that Hoshin, like Subaru and Al, had been summoned.

Only, unlike Subaru and Al, Hoshin had been from four hundred years ago.

Subaru: “The priority is figuring the current situation out, but afterward I might want to take a good look at this Hoshin...”

On the matter of his summoning, Subaru did not intend to start digging for knowledge at this point.

Although he knew the structure of the summons, the purpose of the summoner was completely unknown. However, this call is just a one-way, for him to come here. There was no such convenience that would allow him to go back home.

On this matter, just considering it would be like fishing for the moon in a puddle; there was no solution. What Subaru wanted to know was what predecessors he had had, what kind of footprints they’d left in this world, and where they’d ended up. Nothing more.

Reinhard: “Good morning, Subaru. Did you sleep well last night? You were a great help in reminding Felt-sama to return to her room this morning.”

Felt: "How annoying. It wasn't my intention to go back to there."

After Anastasia, Reinhard strode into the tea room with Felt in tow. He deposited her on a cushion, giving no indication of whether or not he’d heard the song that morning.

He certainly must have known that the “The Sword Demon’s Love Song” was referring to his own grandfather.

Reinhard: “Anastasia-sama, you look more beautiful with each passing morning. I had been a little concerned about your modesty, but now it seems unfounded.”

Anastasia: “Hehehe, this is my treasured possession. I can’t go into Pristella unless I prepare myself. On that note, I still to have to show off to Julius.”

After that, Julius also joined them, and Anastasia showed off her garb to her knight. After she had received her due flattery, Anastasia tilted her head at him.

Anastasia: “Didn’t the others accompany you?”

Julius: “Ricardo said he had something to do and went out to the city last night, but Mimi and her

brothers... they seem to be follow Emilia faction’s Garfiel.” Emilia: “They’re following Garfiel?”

Emilia looked up when she heard the name of one of her servants. Julius nodded.

Julius: “Mimi found Garfiel leaving the hotel, and immediately gave chase. Then Hetaro went after her, and Tivey, who cleans up their messes, said that he’d handle it, so they all left Joshua.”

Anastasia descended upon Joshua with her hands on her hips, who hid behind the tall Julius. The handsome young man bowed his head to his master as he stepped forward timidly, looking extremely pale and concerned.

Joshua: “I am deeply, extremely sorry... I desperately tried to stop them, but Mimi and Hetaro weren’t listening at all. Tivey said to please leave everything to him.”

Anastasia: “Well, if Tivey’s there, they shouldn’t cause any problems. Let’s put it aside, we’re the hosts, but we’re making quite a spectacle of ourselves in front of our guests.

Patiently patting the the ashamed Joshua's shoulders in a sign of forgiveness, Anastasia turned to face everyone present with a gracious smile. She shook her supple hair, her fingers playing with her scarf.

Anastasia: "As you've just witnessed, this embarrassing fiasco is happening, I hope you'll excuse it... our lovely deputy captain, seemingly distracted by her first love, is having a hard time fighting her impulses."

Mimi was obsessed with Garfiel and wanted to cling to his side, everyone present could see this. Everyone, with two exceptions. Emilia had tilted her head in confusion, and Joshua issued a sigh of "so that's what it was".

Subaru: "By the way, Felt, I didn't see that Tonchinkan trio at all. Are they all staying here?"

Felt: "You mean Gaston and the others? Well, having them living here would be a waste and a joke, and they're so unused to places like this that they'd feel awkward. They're living somewhere cheaper in the city, but..."

As she answered Subaru's question, Felt grinned.

Felt: "Hey, that Tonchinkan nickname isn't bad, since their names are Gaston, Larkins, and Camberley. It's not confusing at all, and they don't seem to mind it."

Subaru: "I also think it's a great nickname, I want to praise the me from a year ago. When I first heard their real names, I'd thought a miracle had happened."

The Tonchinkan trio was what they had started as, and the Tonchinkan trio was where they had ended up.

Crusch: "—We're late, it looks like we're the last ones here."

Finally arriving in the tea room was Crusch's faction. Today, she work her long green hair up, and fitting of her new self, wore a gorgeous ladylike-like floral hairpin.

She took a brief walk into the room, followed by Ferris and Wilhelm, who was, as always, solemnly dressed, his back upright. Looking at the old man's posture, Subaru couldn't help but shake his shoulders. He swallowed, trying to steal a glance at the old man's face, and Wilhelm caught Subaru's gaze.

Wilhelm: “——”

He showed a faint smile, giving a slight bow.

Witnessing this action, Subaru received the message contained in the earlier smile: “You don't have anything to worry about”.

Subaru's heart began to beat faster, until he saw Ferris, sitting at Crusch's side, winking and giving a peace sign.

—No worries, we've taken care of it.

That was the message Subaru received from Ferris.

Perhaps Ferris noticed Subaru's attention. He ceased making his movements and began to cling to Crusch's side as he always did.

Subaru was conscious of what it was like to be useless and was afraid of appearing nosy.

Crusch and Ferris certainly knew more than Subaru about the connection between Wilhelm and those songs. They were more sensitive and had greater proximity with Wilhelm.

That was natural, because they were his companions. Subaru didn't need to have worried. Subaru: “Better to say that it is our negligence that we couldn't

help Garfiel.”

This is not to say that he shouldn't care about others. Rather, it is better to first do something for your own faction, which would leave you free to help others.

However, the turbulent depression in Garfiel's body was something that could only be overcome by Garfiel's own efforts, so that line of thought would solve nothing.

Anastasia: “Well, there's still a few people who haven't shown up, but in all likelihood they won't be coming.”

Although the number of occupants was less than that of last night's attendees, the number was still impressive. After all, among what happened last night, eating itself was also very exciting.

What to put on this morning — with a short pause of anticipation, Anastasia smiled and said, Anastasia: “Bring it in.”

At her orders, the hotel staff opened the the door, and, immediately afterward, a large heated block of iron was carried in.

Anastasia: “Today's treat is a traditional Karargi breakfast — the daisukiyaki pancake!” Anastasia rolled her sleeves up slightly, raising her voice.

In front of a silent crowd, the inn's staff coated the iron with a layer of oil and carried in an assortment of ingredients one by one into the room.

The daisukiyaki pancake — from the name, the iron plate, and the assortment of ingredients, Subaru saw something incredibly familiar. Something called,

Subaru: “A Japanese... okonomiyaki...!?”

As something that had been passed down for generations, the Japanese okonomiyaki pancake arrived on stage.

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Emilia: “Subaru, Subaru, look at my masterpiece!”

Beatrice: “Subaru, this is the best pancake made by Betty, I suppose. You can have it, in fact.”

Emilia smile earnestly, and Beako’s face was a little flushed. Each placed their best pancake in front of him.

To Subaru, they were just charred blocks of black. The two, however, were completely unaware of their lack of skill.

Subaru: “Try it yourself before you taste it.”

With this sensible suggestion, Subaru held back a look of pain as the two obediently started on their pancakes and turned his attention to the other factions.

Reinhard: “Finished, Felt-sama.”

Felt: “Oh, it's good, make me some more. I'm always grateful for your food delicious cooking.” Reinhard: “If you count on me for anything else, I’ll be living up to my honor as a knight.”

This was Felt's faction. Reinhard made pancakes at an impossible pace, and Felt gobbled them up just as fast.

Hidden somewhere in Felt's slim figure was King of Stomachs. Or she was just gluttonous. Either way, she ate far more than her share.

All in all, Reinhard had yet to eat, while Felt had already polished off ten.

By the way, Emilia's faction was faring awfully. As had just been demonstrated, Emilia and Beatrice didn't pull their weight, and the only useful members were Otto and Subaru.

Otto: "Look, Emilia-sama and Beatrice-chan. Oh, eat this... Ah! Emilia-sama! Self reflection is good, but don't eat them raw! Beatrice-chan, that's too much sauce!"

Of the other factions, the person that stood out the most was Anastasia.

This was the surprise breakfast that she had planned herself. She had both a deep self-confidence and love for the daisukiyaki.

Anastasia: "Watch carefully! This is the real daisukiyaki!"

She flipped the pancakes neatly and smoothly and had put beautifully made pancakes onto Julius's plate.

Julius: "I am unworthy of eating Anastasia-sama's food, but I think they would be better if they were cooked for a shorter amount of time. Of course, I don't mean to bother Anastasia-sama."

Anastasia: "Of course, of course, they need to be less charred. Even though

Julius is a man, he says so like a tender maiden.”

Unlike Subaru, who redirected his offerings and told his gifters to reflect on themselves, Julius not only ate the pancakes, but kept a straight face and gave Anastasia pointers to improve.

That person was a role model as a knight. Subaru absolutely didn't want to imitate him, and lacked the ability to do so anyway.

Sitting at their side, eating sticky raw pancakes, was a pitiful looking Joshua. His monocle seemed to be fogging over, preventing him from seeing properly, and he desperately tried to hide his struggle. He'd feel mortified if the Subaru whom he hated noticed this embarrassing spectacle, so he didn't greet him.

After seeing the difference in elegance between the brothers, Subaru could only conclude that the most stable faction was Crusch's.

Ferris: “Oh, Crusch-sama, Ferri-chan made really beautiful pancakes, take a look!” Crusch: “Hmm, you certainly have, but I won't lose to you.”

Like a passionate competition between two women, Crusch and Ferris conversed. Their confidence was supported by their results; the pancakes they'd made were perfect. Ferris had even added cat ears to his.

Ferris: “Please enjoy my pancakes, they're filled with Ferri-chan's love. Crusch-sama, open wide!”

Crusch: “Hey, hey... that, um...”

Although, the happy scene did feel a little off putting. That may have been because Subaru knew they were man and woman, or because he knew of how Crusch's temperament had changed after her memory loss.

Anyway, master and servant appeared to have no problems. The last member of their faction, sitting next to the peach colored space, and focusing on his own

pancake was Wilhelm.

Wilhelm: “Hmmm...”

Wilhelm, who'd been trying to turn the dough over, closed his eyes and sighed.

It seemed that his pancake had been torn apart after Wilhelm had left it on the iron for too long, causing it to stick.

He'd unexpectedly seen Wilhelm's clumsy side.

Subaru: “I feel like I saw something I shouldn't have, but in that case...”

Feeling that he should help Wilhelm, Subaru climbed to his feet, then sat back down, reconsidering.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san.”

Wilhelm: “...Subaru-dono?”

Hearing his name, Wilhelm lifted his head. Noticing that Subaru had seen his clumsiness, his brow furrowed in shame.

Subaru gave him an encouraging nod, and gently pointed with his jaw. Wilhelm, who understood his meaning, swallowed quietly.

Wihelm: “——”

Moving to the place indicated by Subaru, Wilhelm took a seat next to Reinhard. He obediently followed each of Felt's instructions, producing pancakes without halt and failing to notice the exchange between Subaru and Wilhelm.

Although, Subaru had already communicated everything he'd wanted to say to Wilhelm.

Consternation, confusion, hesitation, doubt, all wavered in Wilhelm's eyes. He took a long time to reach a decision. Finally,

Wilhelm: "—Reinhard."

Reinhard: "—"

Reinhard froze as Wilhelm forced himself to call his grandson's name.

His spatula hovered in midair as his hands stopped moving, and Felt plated the pancake with a perfect catch.

That act was inelegant, but Reinhard took no notice of it.

The red-haired youth faced Wilhelm with wide eyes. Wilhelm met his gaze head on, without so much as drawing a breath.

Wilhelm: "—"

Reinhard: “——”

Abruptly, silence fell.

Not just between the two, but also between the people around them who had noticed.

The entire room stilled, and the only remaining sounds were those of spatulas meeting the iron.

Time seemed to stagnate as everyone held their collective breaths. Wilhelm: “I, um, that is...”

Reinhard: “What is it, honored grandfather?”

Wilhelm: “I... I’m not so good at this, so, you, if you know any kind of trick to make it easier, could... you teach it me?”

Those were Wilhelm’s clumsy, stuttering words.

Only Crusch, Ferris, and Subaru widened their eyes, understanding what kind of resolve Wilhelm had needed to choke those words out.

Wilhelm himself seem to sag with exhaustion after posing the question.

Wordlessly, Reinhard swallowed as he considered how to answer. His fair features stilled as an unfamiliar emotion washed over his blue eyes.

Reinhard closed his eyes and buried that emotion into a soft sigh. Then, Reinhard: “Yes, I understand, honored grandfather.”

The corners of his mouth turned up as he closed his eyes. That expression could only be described as a smile.

It wasn't the reassuring smile that he usually wore to give others a sense of security. This may have been the only time anyone had seen the young man named Reinhard step out of his role as the Sword Saint and show a genuine smile.

Wilhelm's dumbstruck expression slowly reclaimed its composure.

He lowered his face, closing his eyes as if he were enduring something. He probably had difficulty processing that reaction immediately.

However, the real genuine feeling was there. Once delivered, it only needed to be accepted.

The long divide between the two, grandfather and grandson, could only be offset by a corresponding amount of time.

Subaru, seeing such a possibility play out in front of him, clenched his fist with a plethora of emotions.

From the bottom of his heart, he wanted to greet Wilhelm with joy. And,

???: "— It isn't so easy, honored father. Don't think that your relationship will be fixed with just that."

Suddenly, a red-haired figure threw open the door of the tea room.

The face of the red-haired man who'd spoken those words carried so much malice that everyone froze on the spot, forgetting the flow of time.

Chapter 16: Uninvited Guests

That touching moment was spoiled in the worst way.

The red-haired man's behavior and attitude all betrayed an ugly nature. A rather repulsive smile spread across his unshaven face. He looked to be in his forties and carried the unpleasant scent of alcohol about him.

Although his actions and appearance all evoked a sense of disgust which seemed to reflect his character, the man underneath the poor grooming was quite handsome.

The beautiful characteristics — their desired form, are contaminated by completely different things. Something about the slender man's posture exuded an aura of repulsiveness.

Subaru: "...who are you?"

???: "Ahh?"

The first to break the shocked silence that had fallen across the room was none other than Subaru, who reached behind him and gripped the handle of the weapon at his waist.

Having lost his cool, Subaru's spinning head drove him to act impulsively.

There was nothing that could have angered him more than the interruption of the reconciliation between the clumsy, awkward duo of grandfather and

grandson.

Only Subaru knew why he was in such a frenzied rage.

It wasn't just a reconciliation between a friend and someone he respected that had been interrupted.

It was reconciliation between family. The beginning of a family looking for a connection. To dare to treat it like that,

Subaru: "Answer me. Who the hell are you?"

???: "...you're really casting a hostile look at me, kid. As a knight, you do know who you're trying to provoke, right?"

Subaru: "Don't make me laugh, mister. The one being provocative is you. I'm just asking you exactly what you're doing here."

His patience reaching a breaking point, Subaru stood from the banquet.

Beatrice, who was sitting next to him, saw the feelings fueling his reaction and shifted her position so that she could take his hand at any time. His reliable partner had accurately sensed flames of anger residing in Subaru's heart.

Glancing at Subaru with an unpleasant expression, the man scratched his head with a rude gesture.

???: "You're so annoying, kid. Hey, Sword Saint. Or Juukulius too, or even Argyle. Cut down this rude kid for me."

Subaru: "—hk!"

With the hand he'd been scratching his head with pointing at Subaru, the insolent man casually gave an order to three people in the hall, Reinhard among

them.

Seeing that humiliation to his comrades, Subaru wanted to strike at that grin with his whip. Julius: "Please watch your words."

But he was interrupted by Julius's words before he could move.

Julius, who had stood up at some point, gently placed a hand on Subaru's shoulder from behind. Julius nodded slightly at the frozen Subaru, then turned to face the man.

Julius. "Ferris is present, and Reinhard as well. We three are on temporary leave from our normal duties due to serving our specific masters. Therefore, even the deputy head should not hold the right to command us."

Ferris: "Yep. Ferri-chan is now an obedient servant to the the venerable Crusch-sama~. Therefore, I have nyo obligation to comply with the order."

Keeping his sitting posture, Ferris held Crusch's arm as he offered an immediate follow-up to Julius's words. Although Crusch, whose arm had just been taken, appeared a little surprised, she still filled her eyes with her strong will as she turned toward the red-haired man.

The expression on everyone else's faces were similar; no one hid their hostility toward the man. That was natural; they had just shared a pleasant atmosphere, which had been torn apart by the man.

However,

???: "Oh~ oh~, how scary. Is it not obvious that I was just kidding around? It's not like I don't know the gravity of my orders as the deputy commander."

Subaru: “The... deputy commander?”

The alcoholic man seemed to find something funny, slapping his legs in laughter at Julius and Ferris’s reactions. During their exchange, a word slipped past to Subaru.

After hearing his testimony, the man once again levelled his gaze in Subaru’s direction.

???: “Just so. That’s my delectable adornment. Deputy Commander of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Heinkel, that’s me.

Subaru: “Don’t give me such a righteous look.”

Heinkel: “Hahaha, this kid’s voice is really harsh. It hurts, hurts, hurts me... so shut your worthless mouth, you dog.”

Subaru: “—hk!”

The darkness twinkling in the man’s narrowed eyes sent a shuddering chill down Subaru’s back. It was different from the overwhelming presence of something like the White Whale or a Witch. It was something more unspeakable.

That something was familiar to Subaru, and yet it was impossible to recall exactly what it was. There was nowhere to escape that sense, and Subaru felt a ringing in his ears.

Julius: “Calm down, Subaru. Don’t let the deputy commander’s miasma affect you.” Julius, who stood by his side, spoke to the dizzy Subaru.

Hearing him, that man — Heinkel, faced Julius with a dark smile.

Heinkel: “Ha! A worthy reply. An exemplary, polite answer. To show that respect as a knight, you truly are the Knight of Knights.”

Julius: “Allow me to accept the compliment, Deputy Commander Heinkel... If I may ask, what is the reason for your visit? If my memory serves correctly, your duty as deputy commander should be guarding the capital.”

Heinkel: “Drop those sarcastic words. Just how great of an influence on the vigilant defense of the capital can the absence of one man make? Marcus-sama can handle it perfectly alone, far better than I could... ah, although, a royal family who could suffer disaster is missing.”

Wilhelm: “Heinkel!”

Considering his position, Heinkel's speech was incredibly disrespectful. Upon hearing it, Wilhelm roared his name in fury.

The Sword Demon, shaking with anger directed a sharp glare at Heinkel, who merely shrugged his shoulders.

Wilhelm: “Heinkel...”

Heinkel: “Just calling me once is fine. I’ve yet to lose my hearing from old age. Well, treat that as nonsense and ignore it. More importantly—”

Heinkel responded to Wilhelm’s bitter voice by stricking a finger into his ear as he closed his blue eyes. Then, he opened them to look at Wilhelm.

Heinkel: “This isn’t a very nice feeling. Obviously, I want to offer my congratulations to you for your defeat of the White Whale, but you’ve been avoiding me. This is a feat that took fourteen long years to accomplish, after all. I’d think that I also have the right to join the joyful celebrations. Isn’t that the case, father?”

Wilhelm: “Heinkel, I...”

Heinkel: “Reinhard, what about you?” Reinhard: “—”

Hinkel viciously stabbed his words into Wilhelm’s chest.

Although the old man's face showed the pain of being cut by a blade, Heinkel showed no sign of caring. Instead, he directed his malice at a new target.

Reinhard, who had silently observed the situation until just now, slowly looked toward Heinkel when he heard his name.

Heinkel: “Shouldn’t you also be congratulating father on the burden that’s been lifted off of his shoulders? Since he’s carried out a wife, a mother, a grandmother’s vengeance. At least offer him some nice words. That said...”

Reinhard: “—”

Heinkel: “—With this, father has finally avenged the previous Sword Saint who you’d murdered, isn’t that right?”

— Subaru withdrew his original assertion.

Saying that Heinkel wore a malicious look on his face was a mistake.

Heinkel’s words, expression, attitude, tone, behavior, and gaze; all of these were manifestations of his intent, one that could only be described by the term malice.

Indeed, every bit of Heinkel’s demeanor contained nothing but pure malice.
Subaru: “...previous Sword Saint, murdered...?”

Subaru quietly blurted out those impressionable words.

In his consciousness, there were other questions swimming about, but Subaru

could not reasonably sort through them.

However, malice would always spring on such an opportunity.

Heinkel. “Yeah, the murdered previous Sword Saint. Although I don’t know exactly how ignorant you are, you have to be familiar with the title of Sword Saint, right? Our current Sword Saint is the most powerful hero of our day... but that was something he got from murdering his predecessor, his own grandmother. Although that fact was immediately hidden from public knowledge.”

Wilhelm: “Silence, Heinkel! You... just how far are you intending to go?”

Heinkel: “If you want to say something that sounds nice, then please stop, father. The reason is nothing other than that you simply don’t have the right to disagree with me. After all, when the last Sword Saint died, the first to condemn Reinhard was none other than you.”

Wilhelm: “—hk”

Heinkel’s words contained a dense, noxious poison of abhorrence. And the contents of his speech were no more than vulgar curses. Reinhard had murdered his predecessor? Inconceivable.

Wilhelm had bitterly condemned that Reinhard? Inconceivable. After all, to Reinhard, his predecessor had been...

And to Wilhelm, Reinhard was...

So obviously, that couldn’t have been possible. Reinhard & Wilhelm: “—”

Why? If either of them would deny it, would even say a simple “no”, then Subaru would instantly believe it.

A comrade and a beloved mentor. A malicious man covered with the scent of alcohol. There was absolutely no question as to who Subaru would believe.

Therefore, he wanted one of them to deny those words.

Heinkel: “Is it hard to communicate now? Of course it is. It’s been this way for fourteen years. Neither you nor my father have changed at all. Without change, it’s impossible for you to reconcile. Would Theresia van Astrea forgive such a selfish affair?”

In silence, only Heinke’s profane words echoed.

The previous Sword Saint. She had been Wilhelm’s wife, as well as Reinhard’s grandmother. And, to Heinkel,

Heinkel: “My dead mother is cursing us. Three generations, and none of us have been forgiven.” Reinhard’s father. Wilhelm’s son.

Considering Heinkel’s words and deeds, Subaru correctly deduced his origin. Subaru: “Heinkel van Astrea...”

Testing the name out, he found that it echoed with an air of rightness.

The man in front of him was undoubtedly attached to the Astrea family. Even if his nature as a human was completely different from the upstanding Astreas that Subaru knew.

Heinkel: “Don’t attach the ‘van’ to my name, kid. I haven’t been given that

honor. It's just Heinkel Astrea."

Subaru: "...?"

Hearing Subaru's questioning breath, Heinkel clicked his tongue and looked away.

For the first time since arriving here, bitterness flashed over his half-visible face. His eyes, which had contained only sadistic glee as he'd insulted his family, seemed to carry a look of pain.

—As soon as he'd begun to ponder what had happened, Subaru was interrupted. Emilia: "So... what did you come here for?"

Everyone had been shuddering at Heinkel's unforgivable attitude. However, it was Emilia who first stood up and questioned him.

Her silver hair floating behind her, she stood next to Subaru, who could feel a wave of anger emanating from her.

To Emilia, not feeling anger over the ruined atmosphere of or such an impolite manner was impossible.

She only ever became seriously angry when the situation concerned the feelings of others. And even she was aware of how Reinhard and Wilhelm had been hurt.

Emilia: "We were originally dining happily. To deliberately spoil such a peaceful moment, what exactly did you intend?"

Heinkel: "...oh, this is unexpected. Are you not Emilia-sama? I've heard the rumors. A poor half-witch girl who stands no fighting chance but struggles along anyway."

Emilia: "Although I'd like to one day talk to you and ask how you think of me, right now I only want to hear one answer from you. Why did you come here?"

Heinkel: "—"

Was he attempting to throw Emilia off with insults? Subaru saw through him, and the surprised Heinkel felt disappointed. The members of the other factions also seemed surprised at Emilia's calm demeanor.

It was a surprising difference from the innocence Emilia had shown yesterday. To say that she was pretending to be innocent would be a lie, however. This was Emilia being true to herself.

Emilia: "The reason why we all gathered here, was because we were invited by Anastasia-san. It's very rare that we are all gathered in the same place, so I don't think you would have randomly targeted such an opportunity, even if you are someone important to the knights. Please tell me exactly what you want."

Heinkel: "Tch. Not the same as the rumors..."

Emilia: "Answer me."

Heinkel, who had been again scratching his head, was shaken by Emilia's momentum.

Although Emilia was angry, she was by no means preparing an attack. The pressure emanating from her had nothing to do with magic. It was merely the

strength of her feelings.

Felt: “You marched in with confidence, just to back down when a girl glares at you. Mister, that’s pretty embarrassing.”

Anastasia: “That’s right. Just when I was looking forward to sharing a fun story, too. Songstress-san is apparently quite the whimsical character, isn’t that interesting?”

Crusch: “Well, is that so? Then, I’d appreciate it if this puzzling man would leave, since I’d love to discuss these rumors about Songstress-san with everyone here.”

Heinkel: “—hk”

Following Emilia, Felt, Anastasia, and Crusch spoke up as well.

Like Emilia, the three joined their domineering forces in opposition to Heinkel. Facing the pressure of all four of them, Heinkel’s face couldn’t help but twitch.

They were on completely different levels. Considering his title, his position was rather lacking.

Julius: “I’m sorry, deputy head. If there’s nothing else for time being then I think, for the benefit of all parties involved, that you should take your leave.”

Heinkel’s reaction, and the attitude of the royal candidates.

Julius calculated that this would be the right time to bail Heinkel out. Subaru would have preferred to crush Heinkel on the spot, but changed his mind after seeing Reinhard and Wilhelm.

He didn't fully grasp the situation, and so he couldn't make hasty judgements.
Heinkel: "Grr..."

Julius: "Deputy commander. Please make a decision. Once you do, please..."

???: "—There's no need for that, commoner." That voice shined with self-assurance.

The owner of that confident voice, which could shake the will of its listeners, seemed able to impose their own superiority wherever they went.

Capable of dismissing common sense and establishing a new set of rules, ones which allowed no protest or objection.

Everyone was fully aware that someone was about to stride in from the corridor. Heinkel had long since ceased to exist in anyone's mind.

The sun's burning scowl lit the corridor.

???: "So, all of the trivial people have arrived? You've prepared a stage for mine debut. You deserve praise for your behavior."

A boldly exposed chest hugged by a blood-red dress, a mouth coquettishly covered by a fan. Her arms were crossed under her ample chest, pushing it up in the glamorous act of showing off her white skin without reservation.

Her bright red eyes resembling the licks of a flame, an enchantment capable of mesmerizing all the men in the world.

Even seeing her once would scorch her violent beauty into one's memory

forever. Excessive beauty will become violent. Her existence proved this.

A teenaged girl named Priscilla Barielle.

The uninvited fifth candidate of the Royal Election.

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Priscilla: “So is this it? Frozen faces in a lifeless environment. Do you like this stale air so much? Or is it that every time we meet, such an atmosphere forms? If so, that’s incredibly pitiful.”

Priscilla frowned as she looked throughout the room and spoke in a provocative tone while fanning her face.

Due to her abrupt debut, no one was able to rebut her insults.

Priscilla: “What a poor reception. I deliberately graced this place with mine presence. Placing your forehead on the floor and treating me with admiration and praise is what the correct reaction would be.”

Subaru: “...that’s how people would treat a deity. It wouldn’t happen unless you actually become the king.”

Priscilla: “Hmm?”

Subaru couldn’t help but comment on Priscilla's arrogance. Hearing his mutter, Priscilla turned to look at him, trapping Subaru with her bright gaze. Subaru: “What?”

Priscilla: “...who are you? I had heard that this would be a gathering of fools who know not their place and would compete for the throne. Of course, they would also bring fools who support them. But why is a vulgar commoner like

yourself present?”

Subaru: “Are you for real?”

Subaru was halted by the hostility facing him.

Priscilla’s words were neither joking nor mocking. That is to say, she was being genuine. Priscilla had honestly completely forgotten about Subaru’s existence.

Although they’d gone for a year without seeing each other, Subaru’s idiocy in the capitol shouldn’t have been so easily forgotten.

Although it would be correct to say that this was a very Priscilla-like attitude, it wasn’t an attitude that was particularly appreciated.

???: “Princess, that’s a bit much, isn’t it? Although I don’t know how much he’s worth to you, to me he’s almost like a brother. He’s a very interesting opponent, yeah?”

A thin voice cut across the heavy atmosphere.

That voice was a little hesitant, and was accompanied by the sound of metal. A man with a single arm spoke soothing words as he entered from the corridor to join Priscilla’s side.

His face was entirely covered by a helmet, and his solid, broad physique gave the impression that he was a strong man. He was both a servant to Priscilla and, like Subaru, a summoned man from another world.

And, of course, he had accompanied his master here. He inserted himself between Priscilla and Subaru.

Al: “Hey, you remember, right? It’d be hard to forget when a guy appears in the castle and does something dumb to embarrass himself in front of so many people. This is that guy. Princess even clutched her stomach when she had a good laugh about it.”

Priscilla: “I’ve no impression whatsoever. By the way, Al. I would never laugh so hard that I’d need to clutch mine stomach. Do not belittle such an honorable presence as a casual commoner. Even though it’s you, I won’t be tolerant next time. I’ll cut off your head.”

Subaru: “Give me a little more credit for the things I’ve done in the past year!”

Al soon gave up trying to jog his master’s memory and instead turned to apologize to Subaru, his head bowed in apology. Subaru sighed, feeling like Al hadn’t changed at all this past year.

Although, for the middle aged Al, undergoing a noticeable change would be fairly impossible.

Heinkel: “You're a little late, Priscilla-sama. How long were you going to make me act alone? I’d heard that you were supposed to be coming earlier...”

Priscilla: “Silence, commoner. You will dance as ordered to. Until I give the order to stop, you are expected to dance until you die. Those who misunderstand their duties or attempt to correct a mistake they believe I made are condemned to death.”

Heinkel: “Urp...”

On the other hand, Heinkel, realizing that the atmosphere in the room had changed, immediately turned to Priscilla, who was standing behind him. However, any type of argumentative attitude taken toward Priscilla would be

entirely futile.

Although Hankel was embarrassed by the uncompromising Priscilla, Subaru raised his gaze after listening to their conversation.

Subaru: "Priscilla. Did you bring that guy?"

Priscilla: "Listen, commoner. Just who allowed you to dare to speak to me without the proper honorific? Even the compassionate and generous I, when faced with such a helpless person, have a limit to my patience.

Al: "Princess."

Al called briefly to her as he saw the brutal look lodged in her eyes as she glared at Subaru. Then, Priscilla closed one eye and gave a slight breath.

Priscilla: "I don't know why, but my servant seems to have taken a liking to you. Al, who spared your life... no, there is no need to thank Al. Worship mine forgiveness. If you do so, I'll spare you."

Subaru: "...thanks for your generosity and consideration. Then, the answer to my question is..."

Priscilla: "If you're thinking that I brought this commoner here, then you would be correct. He is present at mine calling." Subaru: "For what!"

Subaru raised his voice at the assertive Priscilla and questioned her purpose.

Uninvited guests upon uninvited guests had arrived. What kind of a plot was brewing here, Subaru needed to know.

However, in the face of Subaru's question, Priscilla merely tilted her head, and, Priscilla: "Perhaps because I thought that it would make an interesting sight." Subaru: "...an interesting sight?"

Priscilla: "That's right. Distorted family disputes, or the joy and sadness that comes from relationships. Such ugly performances are so very exciting. In fact, do you see? The Sword Saint and the Sword Demon acted rather human. Such a sight is very rare."

Subaru: "PRISCILAA!"

That twisted, crooked perspective enraged Subaru.

As Priscilla said, Reinhard's family dispute was hardly seen. And that sea of bitterness was hardly something that needed to be known.

If Heinkel hadn't appeared, such a dark history would never have come to light. Even so, the grandfather and grandson had been trying to restore their relationship.

To have torn that—

Al: "Stop, brother. There's no meaning to a fight happening here. Princess's poor character isn't a thing that's been here for a day or two. Think of it as bad luck... the stars made a mistake."

Subaru: "If you know your master has a poor character then you should be trying to lead her onto the right path. Just indulging her is irresponsible."

Al reached for Subaru with his single arm, slowly shaking his head.

Since his hand was grabbing Subaru's wrist, if anything happened, he wouldn't be able to draw his sword on such short notice.

In other words, he was indicating that he had no wish whatsoever to fight.

Noticing this, Subaru took a long breath. He looked around and found that he was the only one who had acted on his impulsive anger.

Outsiders aside, even Julius and Ferris didn't want to start anything.

Of course. This was a gathering for the throne candidates. No one wanted to entertain the possibility of anyone getting hurt here.

Subaru: "But, even in this case, no matter how much their hearts suffer...!"

Emilia: "Subaru..."

Emilia's wavering eyes called to Subaru, who had been submerged in his fury. Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Subaru also knew that Beatrice was granting him her support.

Feeling the support of the two, Subaru was unable to bow his head.

Anastasia: "The vicious hound's fury seems to have subsided. I'm wondering something... even though I didn't send you an invite, how did you come to learn of this meeting?"

Priscilla seemed ready to take her leave and carry on her agenda. However, Anastasia took an opportunity to halt her.

Although Anastasia's tone was soft, she was quite alert.

Anastasia: "After all, a child running their mouth shouldn't be allowed to run free."

Priscilla: "Don't talk to me with that affectation, mine ears are decaying. I am more than capable of keeping up with a quick-thinking fox."

Anastasia: "Oh my. Could it be that you're neglecting to mock me as a 'commoner'?"

Priscilla: "If you haven't seen what you should have, then that level of ignorance places you in the same category as all of those other fools. Could it be that you are foolish enough as to want me to overlook you?"

The two were engaged in a battle of words — however, Priscilla may or may not have been deliberately provoking Anastasia's natural business focused rhetoric.

Anastasia leisurely caressed the scarf on her neck.

Anastasia: "Leaked information is quite worrying, you know."

Priscilla: "Anything that reaches someone else's ear has been leaked from a mouth lacking caution. And the more that's learned, the more holes that can be found. You're not the only one who observes and listens to others. It's just that kind of thing."

Anastasia: "Ah, but you see, I'd thought of you as someone who wouldn't engage in espionage to deal with the likes of us."

Priscilla: "A flying insect buzzes near mine ear. But what can I do without knowing its location? I would have to catch the insect using my eyes and ears which is precisely what I have done. Of course, the same holds true for you."

Priscilla's implication was that, similarly to dealing with flying insects, there was no need to miss any little piece of information.

Subaru held the same opinion with Anastasia. It was inconceivable that Priscilla had actually adopted the appropriate tactics and put them into practice against her enemy factions.

And the result of that negligence brought about the awful conditions today.
Felt: "That mister is Reinhard's father, yeah?"

Ignoring the conversation so far, a frivolous voice shifted the topic.

Her gaze sweeping across the room, the still eating Felt, her mouth soiled with sauces, she found Priscilla's gaze.

Felt: "After all, I've had some experiences at the capitol, so I caught what was going on from the conversation. I'm not really interested in this guy's family relations. Only, if Reinhard and the mister are together, that's different."

Priscilla: "...hhoo. If it isn't the little girl from the ghetto."

Felt: "Although I don't really care about him, I'm not unrelated to him. House Astrea's lands are in fact a lifeline for us. Except this guy hasn't actually given Reinhard the lands. The power of the family is still in the hands of that mister."

Next to Felt, Reinhard's cheeks stiffened slightly. Subaru caught on to Felt's concern.

As an orphan, Felt had nothing to her name, and was currently using Reinhard's lands as her base, where, bit by bit, she accumulated support.

However, those lands were not Felt's own. They were the assets of the Astrea family, and were on loan to her.

However, those weren't Reinhard's own territories. Even he had borrowed them. Heinkel: "Heh. Looks like you've finally realized the seriousness of the situation, idiot."

Interjecting in their conversation was Heinkel, who wore an expression of pride and laughed with an, "as I expected". He looked as if he had been waiting for the topic to return to Reinhard and Felt.

Heinkel: "That's it. The Head of the Astrea family is still me. I haven't passed the position on to Reinhard, nor do I intend to pass it to him. After all, the cumbersome affairs of politics shouldn't burden our busy Sword Saint."

Felt: "As family head, you should be ashamed. When we went to the Astrea territories, only a handful of civil servants and maids with bloodshot eyes were maintaining it. Now that we've been restoring it, you actually dare to return to rule it?"

Heinkel: "Even if only in name, even if I'm irresponsible, the crown of family head is still mine. What's more, haven't my lands begun to improve? The people should be crying out in support of their lord now. I'm so loved by my people, I'm moved to the point of tears."

Heinkel relentlessly mocked Felt, who tried to swallow her rage.

At those vile and poisonous words, Subaru's vision turned white with rage. The room was filled with anger at the disgusting sight.

It was clear now. This man was completely abnormal.

Heinkel: “Your sense of crisis is right, Reinhard’s master. The Astrea territories are mine. However, I’ll never support you. You can clearly see who I’m supporting!”

Heinkel stood as if on a stage, expecting applause. He gestured toward Priscilla, a clear declaration that he would support a different candidate than his son and father.

Heinkel: “I’ve heard about your achievements in the past year, in the place of me, the lord. In addition to agreeing that is a great achievement, I will also say — it is time for you to take your leave of them now. If you understand it, hurry and hand it to me...”

Priscilla: “Hey, commoner.”

Heinkel: “—Ahh? What is it, Priscilla-sama? I’m doing something very important right now.”

The ensuing violence had to be seen to be believed.

Shortly after she’d finished speaking, Priscilla trust her fan at Heinkel, who had widened his eyes. Following the unfolding fan was a terrifying gust that slammed Heinkel’s slender body toward the ground with powerful momentum.

Heinkel’s eyes rolled back in his head, having lost his consciousness after the impact. But, Priscilla’s attacked went one step further.

She kicked him into the air with a swipe of her foot, and swiftly reached her hand up to meet his body.

Al: “Princess, end your anger here. Otherwise, he’s going to die.” Priscilla:

“——”

Priscilla was stopped before she could deliver the final blow with her arm by Al, who had predicted her outrage. Priscilla then turned to her helmeted servant.

A crimson sword had appeared in her grabbed wrist. It had a Western style curve and narrow blade, but it was engraved with wave-like flames. Even at a glance, it was an unusual sword, having instantly materialized in, and disappearing from, Priscilla's hand.

Witnessing that, Al slowly released Priscilla's wrist.

Al: “Really, spare me. You even drew your Yang Sword, that's really not good for my hear— tgah!”

Priscilla: “That was very rude, Al. From whom did you receive permission to dare to touch mine flawless skin? You won my favor on a whim, so to defile mine body is a mere dream which lies at the end of a dream.”

Priscilla forcefully slapped her freed hand on Al's stomach. She exhaled loudly from her nose, then looked down at the pitiful Heinkel who was writhing on the ground.

After witnessing the brutal look in his eyes, he certainly deserved this. However, what Al said was also true.

Priscilla: “However, there is some truth to what you said. It would be excessive to kill him.” Al: “If you think so... then I hope you'll be more gentle with me in the future, gah.” Priscilla: “Quiet. I am not a demon. I will allow you to lick mine feet later as a reward.”

Al: “Don't put it like I get turned on by that!? It'll lead to misunderstandings!”

Al, who had fallen to his knees after receiving a blow, desperately defended himself, but did not receive Priscilla's attention. She gazed at Heinkel with her blood-red eyes, having calmed down for the time being, and snapped her fingers.

Priscilla: "Schultz. Move the commoner out of here. Although dull, he is seemingly a worthwhile recruit. Considering what that took, giving him up would be a shame."

Schultz: "Yes, Priscilla-sama."

In response to her call, another figure emerged from the hall.

It appeared that a child who was many years from being fully grown had been waiting in the corridor.

He had pink fluffy curls, a slim, feminine figure, a fair face, and a high voice which indicated that he had yet to reach puberty. Seeing an undeveloped child dressed in a butler's uniform felt unethical.

A young boy who, if going solely by appearances, looked to be around Beatrice's age. Schultz: "I apologize, Heinkel-sama."

To the unconscious Heinkel, Schultz took Heinkel's feet and began to struggle to pull him outside. Of course, it was very unreasonable to expect a child to carry Heinkel out. However, Schultz made no complaint about Priscilla's order, and at the same time he treated Heinkel with an attitude of respect.

Al: "Schultz-kun always tries to be brave and strong, no matter what kind of an order he receives. Princess needs to remember to praise him later."

Priscilla: "That's only natural. He is under mine employ and serves me wholeheartedly. That undefined status isn't simply a foolish and reckless loyalty. Later, I'll allow him to lick mine feet."

Al: "Schultz-kun wouldn't realize that you're joking and would tearfully do exactly as you request. Please give him a more normal reward."

Priscilla: "Hmm. Then perhaps I'll give him the honor of being held by mine body as I sleep." Al: "...well, that shouldn't be a problem. But now I want to take his place."

That was the listless dialogue between Priscilla and Al as they watched Schultz and Heinkel leave.

Election's factions remained.

Felt: "So, what's going to happen with that guy? You seriously want to drive us away from the Astrea territory to weaken us?"

Priscilla: "You do not have to treat that commoner's words with such gravity. Weren't you responsible for the revitalization of that territory? If the lord returns to his house intending to drive you away then who will follow him? Although the people are foolish and ignorant, they are not heartless fools who forget their grace. If you make a large wave, a correspondingly large wave will return to you. He won't be able to summon any waves."

Felt: "...then, why was that guy invited?"

Priscilla: "It's already been said, hasn't it? I found the situation interesting. Sooner or later, all I want will be in mine hands. That is an established fact. In that case, only mine route will vary. And that route is precisely decided by me. To the end, I brought him in as a toy to kill time."

No matter what happens the outcome can not be changed.

The absolute confidence Priscilla held transcended common sense and unreasonably imposed her will upon the world. The only way to deal with it would be to give up and bow down, or to fight it with a similar attitude. And so,

Candidates: “———”

Here, four candidates met her gaze without hesitation in an expression of confrontation. Accept those glares, Priscilla gave a hearty, delighted laugh.

Priscilla: “Excellent. The outcome has been decided but mine journey will naturally have its share of happy excitement. Mine self has decided that you are all a cut above the commoners. And, once you have become worthy of being mine opponent... then, mine self will of course welcome you with my full capabilities.”

You are not yet worthy of being my enemies, was the judgement Priscilla had just made.

No, she had said so long ago. She still treated Emilia as an insect. She didn't think of them as enemies at all.

Then,

Felt: “I'll be sure to make you cry and regret that arrogance.”

Felt's declaration was exactly the will of all the occupants of the room.

Chapter 17: That Ever Present Armor

—Fully recovering the meal’s original atmosphere was now impossible.

After hearing Felt’s sharp words, a satisfied Priscilla had left the hotel with Al in tow. It could probably be said that she was delighted at having achieved all of her goals there.

Considering the damage she’d wrought, she really was selfish.

Everyone had soon returned to their meals, unable to chat as happily as they had before.

The impact she’d left was incredibly hurtful to everyone present. In particular, the feelings of both Reinhard and Wilhelm must have been unimaginable to outsiders.

Even so, the fortitude of those two men was strong enough that neither would allow any of their anxiety to show in their expressions.

Of course, the imminent reconciliation of grandfather and grandson could only be postponed. Just that was enough for a hard knot to take root in Subaru’s heart.

Otto: “We’re incredibly lucky that Garfiel wasn’t present.”

Those were the words left by Otto as he’d departed for the Muse Chamber of Commerce following the meal.

As he'd said, it would have been a serious matter if Garfiel or someone else who was prone to rage had been at the meal. It wasn't difficult to imagine Garfiel flying at Heinkel in a rage and causing a violent tragedy.

Everyone at the breakfast had, for the most part, calm and rational natures. Maybe Priscilla had even factored that into her satisfaction.

Subaru: "...how could that be? That's really a coincidence among coincidences." The luck which Priscilla arrogantly prided herself on was next to impossible.

It had only brought them the worst of results. Although irrefutable, it was painful to admit. Emilia and Beatrice's worry surely hurt more than any indignation Subaru had felt.

Even Felt had been acting reasonably, leaving Subaru the only one who let his emotions get the better of him. To both foe and friend, Subaru wanted to give apologies for his lack of consideration.

Emilia and Beatrice had returned to their rooms for a short break before accompanying Subaru on their walk.

Subaru took the time to try to walk off his frustration, his footsteps harder than usual.

The inside of his shoe pressing against his foot felt rather like a reflection of his frustration.

Landing on that train of thought, Subaru began to apply more and more pressure in his steps, trying to relieve his feelings, until,

Julius: “Don’t step so hard on the floor, Subaru. You’ll cause trouble for inn’s staff.” Subaru, who had been gazing down at his feet, turned his head toward the sound.

He had apparently unknowingly walked into the corridor facing the courtyard. Standing in the courtyard was Julius, who was bathing in the wind.

His hand swept his purple hair back in a practiced gesture, and it withstood the cool breeze with a dramatic image.

Julius’s handsome face, as always, inspired envy in Subaru, who clicked his tongue at the other young man before taking a seat next to him in the corridor.

Julius: “Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama are not with you, correct?”

Subaru: “That’d be the case. Neither of them are children. They’re at the age when they want sometime, and I have the delicacy to respect that right. I’ve set up a time and place for a date later.”

Julius: “Although I’m unfamiliar with some of the phrases you’ve used, it seems that even you have learned to better understand the thoughts of others.”

Subaru: “Ugh, you...!”

In a breach of convention, Julius was the one who spoke the first instigatory words of a quarrel. However, after seeing Julius’s expression, Subaru’s annoyance dissipated.

Julius shook his head slightly,

Julius: “Apologies. If you were truly one who was incapable of being considerate of others, you wouldn’t have been able to so loudly denounce the

deputy commander in front of everyone... I should offer you my gratitude.”

Subaru: “That sounds like a thanks, so please don’t give me one. That guy just rubbed me the wrong way. Compared to everyone else who maintained their cool, I must have looked awful.”

Julius: “No such thing happened. It was precisely because of your rash manner that others could calm down, even myself included. Your impulsive reactions were helpful, it seems.” Subaru: “You, you weren’t planning to praise me from the start, were you?”

Subaru frowned at Julius’s genuine tone.

Julius was always subtly taunting when he spoke to Subaru, although it came from both sides, so Julius wasn’t solely at fault. In any case, it was nigh impossible for the two to speak to each other honestly.

Subaru: “I know. I should be more calm and collected to be like a knight. Even holding the position of knight, I still can’t consciously keep a cool head, even though all would be outlined in a schoolboy's book of manners.”

Julius: “That’s right. Indeed, from a knightly perspective, your behavior was by no means commendable. However.”

Facing the uncomfortable Subaru, Julius fell silent. His next action led Subaru’s eyes to widen in surprise. Subaru: “What are you doing?”

Julius: “It’s as you can see.”

Subaru: “All I can see is you bowing at me.” Julius bent down and inclined his head to Subaru.

This was not a knight’s courtesy. Nor was it a ceremonious ritual. There was no formal inspiration of his motion at all. This was completely unlike Julius.

Julius: “Thanks. Thank you. Thank you for showing the indignation that I could

not.” Subaru: “...I have utterly no idea what you’re talking about.”

Julius: “Valuing a knight’s honor means that, no matter the occasion, you must act with virtue. Even if your own friend is being disdained, even if your own friend is treated with inhumane words, you cannot indulge in behaving according to your own feelings. But you are not like that.”

Maintaining his posture, Julius repeatedly gave Subaru his share of thanks. Subaru could only feel puzzled at the unexpected reaction.

However, seeing your passionate rebuttals, I felt ashamed of myself. So I want to thank you.” Subaru: “Instead of venting your anger, huh...”

Julius: “——”

Subaru uttered a sound of understanding, and Julius finally looked up.

With just one sentence, Julius had finally revealed his genuine feelings, which were reflected in his gaze. Seeing him, Subaru could only give him a snarl.

Subaru: “What a stupid thing to say. Really, stop kidding around.” Julius: “... stop kidding around, huh.”

Subaru: “Of course. Why should I be angry in your place? I was angry purely because I’d personally been ticked off, not because there was someone else who wanted to snap at that bearded guy. I could never do something as clever as express someone else’s anger.”

As if misunderstanding the matter, Subaru spoke these genuine thoughts to Julius.

Subaru didn’t consider his anger some kind of noble indignation. After all, only Reinhard and Wilhelm could understand their own feelings.

Subaru was an outsider who had simply been angry that such an atmosphere had been defiled. His anger was purely for his own sake.

Subaru: “If you were angry, why didn’t you say something? I couldn’t have calmly dealt with the old man alone but if you’d been backing me up then we might have fazed him.”

Julius: “No matter what, he’s still the deputy commander of the knights. It’d be fairly troublesome if I made an enemy of a commanding officer.”

Subaru: “This doesn’t have to do with your rank. Not to mention, you just blurted ‘no matter what’, don’t be so narrow minded. You’re constantly thinking about behaving like a knight, or acting with a knight’s demeanor, or whatever. Is even your heart coated in a knight’s armor?”

Julius: “——”

Facing a silent Julius, Subaru rested his elbows on his knees and with his cheeks in his palms, gave an exaggerated sigh.

What a stupid quarrel! Subaru had not only rejected Julius’s gratitude, but had also been enraged by him.

Thinking of the cause of the incident, including Heinkel, made him more angry. Julius: “Even my heart is coated in a knight’s armor... ah, that’s pretty harsh.”

Subaru: “Although I think my wording was pretty artistic, just ignore it. I was only kidding.”

Julius: “No, I’ll keep it in mind. I’m glad that I’m learning a lesson from you. This is something that I never would have thought possible a year ago.”

Subaru: “That uncomfortable stuff might be over with, but I still have

nightmares about it.”

He still sometimes had dreams set in the knights’ training field, about his confrontation with Julius and his subsequent brutal beating.

Although the physical suffering he’d experienced at the time was painful to recall, what he’d gone through mentally and emotionally hurt far more to remember. The memory of his own incompetence had been clearly imprinted into his mind, where, from time to time, it played like a movie.

Although, of course, his nightmares weren’t merely filled with his duel with Julius, but it was something that could rival the memories of so many deaths.

Julius: “If you can help it, I’d rather that this didn’t continue. Thinking of meeting with you in your dreams every night is unpleasant.”

Subaru: “That’s rich, coming from the culprit. Don’t you think I’d rather share my dreams in intimacy with Emilia-tan?”

Julius: “So your pursuit of her has been reduced to relying on dreams, rather than your own ability. That suits your style.”

Subaru: “You bastard, don’t treat me like trash after praising me. And take a look at yourself!”

Julius: “Anastasia-sama is a lovely woman. There is no greater honor than being able to serve her in at a distance. Naturally, I think I should be very happy with my place.”

At Julius’s calm response, Subaru gave a cat-like growl.

The uncomfortable atmosphere vanished along with his bow as Julius recovered his usual image. Subaru frowned in relief, coughed, and changed the flow of the conversation.

Subaru: “About that bearded old man... he said he was the deputy commander or whatever, is that true?”

Julius: “It’s understandable that you’re doubtful, but that is indeed true. That man was the Deputy Commander of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Heinkel Astrea himself.”

Subaru: “Are they blind? Or deaf? Or messed up in the head?”

Julius: “You truly do question everything. Of course, none of the senior knights or squires can question the deputy commander’s qualifications. In fact, the title of deputy commander serves more like a decoration, and no one has seen him perform his duties as of yet.”

Julius answered with a shake of his head, and Subaru’s imagination swam with the mental image of a senior official.

To be given incredible rewards while shirking any truly important responsibilities — that was exactly how Subaru envisioned the majority of senior government officials, and that was indeed Heinkel’s situation.

On top of that, the people around him even understood his incompetence and knew of his demeanor.

Subaru: “Could it be that he’s taking advantage of his status as the Sword Saint’s father?”

Julius: “...that isn't... the entire case. Taking the role of the deputy commander isn’t something that would escape the attention of his son, Reinhard. Although Reinhard’s fairness is universally acknowledged, how can we judge it if it concerns his family? Not everyone would trust him.”

Subaru: “I don’t think that Reinhard would be willing to bend his moral code

for his father.”

Julius: “Even so, he is still Reinhard’s father. No matter what others think, to Reinhard, he is undoubtedly a family member who shares his blood. No one can know what he himself thinks.”

Julius spoke calmly to appease the heated Subaru. Grinding his teeth, Subaru voiced a groan.

As Julius said. No matter how mediocre he is, as long as he was Reinhard’s father, then only Reinhard’s own heart would know whether or not he should renounce their relationship.

As a knight who values fairness and civility, he should not be deceived by paternity. But it wouldn’t be easy for Reinhard himself to freely cut off such a relationship.

Obviously, outsiders could hold a firm stance on what Reinhard should or shouldn’t do, but to do so would be incredibly arrogant.

Subaru: “Isn’t the entire case’, you said, so are their other reasons? What else could there...”

Julius: “He’s also the head of House Astrea, and Wilhelm-sama’s son. To put it bluntly, he’s related to the kingdom’s best knight and the previous Sword Saint. The possibility that not gifting him a high-ranking position would lead to treason cannot be overlooked.”

This was Julius’s brief, emotionless reply.

Hearing it, Subaru only needed a few seconds to understand the implication behind it.

Subaru: “This country! Whether it’s Reinhard! Or Wilhelm! I’d never believe that! If Heinkel resented the country then the Sword Saint’s family would turn against it...! Treating them so cautiously, as if they were a time bomb, if that’s how it is...!”

If so, wasn’t that an insult to Reinhard and Wilhelm?

Their honor was so obvious, yet the country still believed them capable of treason.

The anger that Subaru now felt matched the intensity that it had been when he was facing Heinkel. Julius shook his head and pressed a hand to Subaru’s shoulder.

Julius: “Your anger is expected. However, the kingdom has to deal with every possibility.”

Subaru: “Something impossible isn’t a possibility! That kind of thing would clearly, obviously never happen!”

Julius: “...Wilhelm-sama was the former commander of Lugunica’s knights.”
Subaru: “Huh!?”

Subaru, who’d been trying to escape Julius’s grip, unconsciously stopped moving at those words.

Julius: “Fourteen years ago, a member of the royal family had been abducted in the capitol. At that time, Wilhelm-sama had headed the guards, and was placed in charge of the search.”

Subaru: “So, what about it? Even I know about famous events like this.”

Felt was the member of the royal family who had been abducted in childhood — this was a story that had become widespread. Subaru, who’d already

dismissed the story, didn't catch the meaning of Julius's words.

Subaru: "I know the royal child was never found. So what then? Wilhelm-san took responsibility, and then resigned as a knight, so he has a reason to hate the kingdom? But then..."

Julius: "At that time, the former Sword Saint was sent on an expedition to subjugate the White Whale — that is, during the days when Wilhelm-sama had been searching for the abductor."

Subaru: "——"

Pondering Julius's words, Subaru fell into a void of thought. Something Wilhelm had once said seemed to fill that blank in.

Wilhelm had said that he hadn't been at his wife's side when she'd died.

Subaru: "...he said he couldn't be with his wife when she died, and since the investigation was what kept him from it, then, Wilhelm-san would end up hating the kingdom, or something..."

Julius: "I don't know what Wilhelm-sama's true intent was. However, it's true that after the search for the abducted princess ended and the great conquest ended in failure, Wilhelm-sama withdrew from the guards. After that, that branch of the knights would have collapsed if it weren't for the steps Marcus-sama took to reorganize them."

Subaru: "I don't give a damn about that! I'm trying to talk about Wilhelm-san! You... is that what you think? That Wilhelm-san would resent everyone because of his wife? That... that's...!"

Raising a banner of rebellion toward the kingdom due to his own resentment.

Was that really how Wilhelm van Astrea appeared? Why, after seeing

someone who was so deeply in love, and willing to give up everything for his love, could anyone think that? Had they never looked him in the eye, or gazed at his steady back?

Had they never seen the Sword Demon's frank, honest blade?

Subaru: "That person would never do such a thing, why does nobody understand!" Julius: "——"

This time, Subaru indeed threw off the hand on his shoulder, and shoved at Julius's chest. He stood and backed up, losing his momentum.

The yellow eyes looking back at him seemed to almost admire Subaru's anger. He understood. He knew that this degree of anger was inappropriate.

What Julius had said to Subaru had not reflected his own views. Julius's own attitude was apparent.

After all, one year ago, Julius had comforted Wilhelm after he'd slain the White Whale. He'd comforted Wilhelm, who had spent fourteen long years trying to avenge his wife.

There was no doubt that he would never have suspected that Wilhelm would ever hold a revolt against the kingdom.

Subaru: "...sorry. I was being an idiot."

Julius: "No, don't apologize. You're in the right. I'm the one in the wrong —If anyone should apologize, it's me."

Dropping their gazes, they both closed their eyes. They both felt an

unbearable weight.

Their helplessness in doing anything to change the country's doubt in Wilhelm. Subaru and Julius both, even if they vented their feelings, were still ultimately powerless.

Subaru: "So is Reinhard also like that?"

Julius: "...by the same logic, Reinhard would resent the kingdom for sending his grandmother to her death and in turn killing his predecessor, but that isn't the case."

Subaru: "Then..."

Julius: "However, the kingdom doesn't doubt that Reinhard has no intent in holding a rebellion. Rather, that suspicion goes to Heinkel-sama."

At the appearance of Reinhard's father's name, Subaru's eyes widened.

Even though it was a name he didn't want to hear, he couldn't just plug his ears at the topic. Any conversation involving that name wouldn't be pleasant.

Subaru: "How's Reinhard's relationship with his father? Aside from the obvious blood one."

Julius: "There was a period of time when Reinhard gave Heinkel-sama his complete, utmost obedience. That might seem natural since they're father and son, but... that time exceeded the bounds of what it should have been."

Julius averted his eyes from Subaru's, as if speaking regretfully.

The relationship that he'd said "exceeded the bounds" of a typical parent-child relationship. His words were vague enough that it was difficult to know what he'd meant. However, Julius didn't look eager to elaborate, and returned his gaze to Subaru.

Julius: “As Reinhard grew to be more self-reliant, that attitude should have disappeared. But, without decisively knowing whether or not Reinhard would still listen to Heinkel-sama’s words, those doubts cannot dissipate.”

Subaru: “...so, to keep Heinkel from giving Reinhard an order to turn against the kingdom, Heinkel was shown favor, right?”

Julius: “Perhaps it’s even worse. Although this is still a rumor that is considered hearsay, I’ll tell you, since you’re also Reinhard’s friend, and you felt anger for his sake.”

With that troubling opening remark, Julius looked over their surroundings with a sweep. Confirming that there were no eavesdroppers, he stood close to Subaru’s side.

Then,

Julius: “The deputy commander was a suspect in the investigation of the abduction of the princess fourteen years ago.”

Subaru: “——!?”

Julius: “There is no conclusive evidence. However, he has been repeatedly questioned about his suspected involvement.”

Subaru: “If that’s true, then, the abduction was...”

Julius: “The truth of that is no longer relevant. Such a suspicious character holding one of the kingdom’s highest positions of power, that’s the crux of the problem now.”

The glorious blessing following the title of Sword Saint.

However, as more and more of the situation came to light, Subaru began to think that the title was more curse than blessing.

Subaru: “However, if he really was related to the abduction, then Heinkel is the reason why his father and mother couldn’t meet face to face one last time.”

Julius: “...that’s not all. I’ve also heard that it was Heinkel-sama who recommended that Theresia-sama, who’d already set her blade aside, be the one to take his place against the White Whale.”

Julius: “There is an accurate record of this. The deputy commander refused to battle with the White Whale and instead recommended that his mother do it.”

Utterly speechless. —Subaru could not find it in himself to formulate a response.

Unlike the unfounded rumor before, what Julius had just said was backed up by real evidence. Records and witnesses meant that this was fact.

Heinkel sent his own mother as his replacement to the battle with the White Whale.

That is to say, his mother subsequently died in battle, and his father took up the blade of revenge when he could not be with his mother in her last moments. However, rather than face any punishment, he used his son's talent as a shield which protected his comfortable and stable life.

How could it be? How could there be a human who was capable of this?
Subaru: “There has to be a mistake somewhere, right...?”

He didn’t want to believe it.

It wasn't about wanting to believe in Heinkel's humanity. Subaru had already accepted him as the worst kind of person, and anyone who spoke to him could instantly tell.

However, he was reluctant to admit that such evil beyond evil, such immorality, such depravity even existed.

He hoped to believe in ethics, or honor, human nature, and had thought there was a limit to how much evil human nature could permit.

However, things that would be a sin even in imagination could happen in reality.

Julius: "...sorry. That's not something I should have told someone who hadn't fully prepared themselves."

Julius whispered to the speechless Subaru, his voice shrouded in gloom.

Subaru could fully empathize with the feelings which Julius's tone had given away, something which was entirely unlike the always calm Julius.

Subaru: "It's... it's not your fault, I was the one who wanted to hear. Although it would be a little easier if I could blame you."

Julius: "I'm not in a position to accept your words. Obviously, what I relayed to you were just rumors about another family's business, but I still spoke of them as if I'd witnessed them myself. No matter how you look at it, I spoke without thinking of the gravity of those rumors. As a knight, I really should be ashamed."

Subaru: "But you witnessed it, didn't you? Since you're Reinhard's friend."
Subaru replied to Julius's self-deprecation.

Julius again lifted his head toward Subaru, who nodded back at him.

Subaru: "Although I don't know the specifics of your friendship with Reinhard, I can still see that you're worried about him. So I won't condemn your anger or call it too aggressive. I don't think it's right to just step out of something like that solely because it's not your business."

Julius: "...then, what would you do?"

Subaru: "Is it wrong to interfere if you hear others around you crying? If I saw my friend feeling hopeless, I'd certainly call to him. If you care about Reinhard, doing so would be completely natural. Especially since your feelings aren't like mine."

If Julius were to interfere for nothing other than his curiosity, Subaru would regard him with contempt.

However, Julius's feelings, as proven by both his attitude and his words in their exchange, were nothing so shameful.

Subaru: "Didn't I just tell you? There's no need to adhere so rigidly to you knightly honor or whatever. Even if there were, occasionally taking off your armor and becoming 'Juli' wouldn't be so bad. Who's to say that acting casually wouldn't lead to a better situation?"

"Juli" was the pseudonym Julius had given during the battle with the Witch Cult.

Due to his position, Julius was unable to join any mercenary group, so he'd elegantly hidden his identity with a slight falsehood. It was a name that everyone had eventually given up on using, even Julius himself. However, that Julius was the one who'd been least like a knight.

Julius: "Juli, huh... that name really came from out of the blue!"

Subaru: "It was from so long ago, and it was only used once. I'm pretty impressed with myself for remembering it."

Julius: "Don't adhere so rigidly to your knightly honor or whatever.' You've really said some difficult things. I'm sure you know what they all call me."

Subaru: "It's because they've been calling you the greatest and what not that you've become so physically and mentally stiff. You should shed that armor when you bathe, and do some stretches with me before putting it back on."

Subdued bent over, affixing his palms to the ground as if showing off his newfound flexibility. Although his body had been quite stiff before he'd started learning parkour, he'd learned to move with more softness and pliability.

Then, to the Subaru who was showing off his flexibility,

Julius: "If you're trying to show me up, I really can't do anything but sigh."
Subaru: "Oh!?"

As he spoke, Julius spread his legs apart and reached toward the ground. Subaru couldn't help but admire his control over his slender legs and the suppleness of his hips as he lowered himself to the ground.

Was that to say that Julius could easily surpass Subaru in any area?

Subaru: "Gah... but, but! If it were playing a lute-lyre, or sewing, I'd definitely win...!"

Julius: "Although I can't see the merit in triumphing in hobbies, I've also taken up playing musical instruments. Although I'd have to say that tailoring is fairly difficult."

Subaru: “Grrr! You said it! Hobbies! A hobby held by a guy like you can’t be anything but superficial. I’ll never form a band with you. My lead singer role will be taken away!”

Julius unwound his feet and stood with a flourish.

He suddenly flicked his bangs at Subaru, then smiled at the sky as if boasting a victory. Julius: “I see. As ‘Juli’, gazing at the sky and bathing in the wind feels like this.” Subaru: “Eh?”

Julius: “In retrospect, the sky I saw back then was also somewhat different from how it usually was. So this would be the reason, then.”

Subaru: “You keep getting more and more unreasonable. You fake bastard.”

Subaru shrugged his shoulders in annoyance and flopped onto the floor of the corridor. Julius narrowed his eyes at him as if still dazzled by the sun.

At last, the uncomfortable air surrounding their conversation had dispersed.

Of course, what they’d discussed was still lodged in their memories, and knots still remained in their chests. But, even so, they could at least work through their frustration together.

—Looking at only that image, those two seemed like a pair of ordinary friends.

Chapter 18: A Time for Song and Dance

Subaru finished his simultaneously important and trivial conversation with Julius and left the

Water Plumage Pavilion with Emilia and Beatrice.

Emilia: "In the courtyard, you were chatting in a friendly way with Julius for once. What were you talking about?"

Subaru: "First of all, thinking that I was being friendly with that guy was a mistake, but what do you think we were talking about?"

Emilia: "Where should we go play next time?' Something like that." Subaru: "Are we school friends!?"

Even if Emilia's casual assumption about their relationship was right, even assuming that Julius and Subaru went to the same school, they would be in entirely different social groups. Schools, just like society, ran on a hierarchy.

In a sense, didn't something similar to a division between classes exist universally? Subaru: "Whether in this world or another world, those hardships are the same..." Emilia: "Hey, hey, what did you talk about?"

Subaru: "I was anxious to ask about those hostile recent events. What exactly happened earlier?"

What preceded that? What's going to happen next? Those kinds of topics." Emilia: "Isn't that being friendly?"

Emilia tilted her head in question. Subaru followed suit with a sigh.

Looking at only their trivial words at the end of their conversation, maybe they did look like friends. But it was himself and Julius, so that wasn't possible. He wasn't a friend, he was something infinitely more annoying.

Although it was impossible to say exactly what that was.

Subaru: “Well, he’s definitely not a friend. There’s no doubt about it.” Emilia: “Honestly...”

Emilia turned around to look to Beatrice, who wordlessly sighed in response. Subaru felt somewhat annoyed by the air of mutual understanding between the two.

In any case, his conversation with Julius in the courtyard had concerned Reinhard, Wilhelm, and their relationship with Heinkel Astrea.

So if he truthfully conveyed the contents of their conversation to Emilia then Subaru would feel rather guilty.

In addition to hesitating to reveal the private affairs of the Astrea family, Subaru didn’t want to cause unnecessary stress for Emilia.

After all, this was a helpless, tricky situation.

The history of the Astrea family wasn’t something that outsiders could easily approach.

Julius had been involved in the history himself and, acknowledging Subaru’s concern, had relayed everything to him.

—And still, Subaru felt a nauseous itch in his stomach.

Emilia: “So, Subaru. Although it’s a pleasure to take a walk like this, what are

you planning?” Subaru: “——”

While Subaru wrestled with his inner anxiety, Emilia suddenly smiled and uttered such a remark.

Subaru, taken by surprise, was momentarily lost for words. He hurriedly blinked and shrugged.

Subaru: “That’s harsh to hear, Emilia-tan. I just had a pure wish to wander the beautiful Watergate City with Emilia-tan. At most, I have only a trace of a temptation to lure you too close to a fountain and appreciate your appearance when soaked with water.”

Emilia: “Huu~, Subaru, to say such a thing. You really are a stubborn person. Even I know that something so trivial isn’t your real intent.”

Beatrice: “.....”

Emilia raised her pouting cheeks, and Subaru pressed an uncomfortable hand to his forehead. He looked to Beatrice for aid, however, the young girl walking between Emilia and Subaru gazed up at Subaru with the same expression Emilia wore.

Without any support, Subaru quickly raised his hands in surrender. Subaru: “Okay, I surrender. I’m sorry. I won’t splash Emilia-tan.” Emilia: “Su-ba-ru.”

When his name was called out in anger, Subaru dropped his raised hands and surrendered for real this time.

Emilia: “Subaru, you naughty.”

Subaru: “You saw through me, Emilia-tan. Although, I was your mentor, so I should be rewarded... right, right, I’ll be serious now.” Emilia: “Honestly.”

In response to Emilia, who'd raised her hand in an "I'll hit you" gesture, Subaru could only smile.

Subaru: "I wasn't trying to hide anything, I just wanted to give you a little surprise. Right now, we're headed to Pristella's city park, where yesterday I had unexpectedly met the Songstress."

Emilia: "Wow, Songstress-san? Um, then, will she be there today?"

Subaru: "Your shining eyes are adorable. Yeah, I have the famed Songstress's contact information. Although I have faith in Otto's ability to negotiate, I also have faith that his bad luck will probably cost us this opportunity. So this is insurance."

Emilia: "I see. And if we're on good terms with Songstress-san, then asking Kiritaka-san to trade us the ore would be like a personal favor."

Subaru: "That's it. Well done."

Subaru gestured his arms over his head in the shape of a circle. Emilia was so innocent.

In fact, although the transaction would hardly be as simple and straightforward as Emilia had said, there was no need to point out her mistake.

Emilia was only purely looking forward to getting along with Liliana. Subaru could handle all of the other stuff in secret.

Subaru: "I can't help but feel that the likes of Emilia-tan and Liliana will have some kind of a chemical reaction..."

Emilia: "Chemical reaction?"

Subaru: “From the looks of it, I think Emilia-tan and Liliana will get along well.”
Emilia: “Will we? Haha, I hope so.”

Although somewhat apologetic to Emilia, who was just looking forward to meeting, Subaru had already been somewhat beset by the fatigue that would surely follow any meeting with Liliana.

Even while hoping that Liliana would be in the park to fulfill his goals, Subaru prayed that he wouldn't have to see her again.

Of course, if she wasn't there, the afternoon would just be a date with Emilia — although he wanted to avoid that, Subaru couldn't deny that he would enjoy it.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, don't you want to go water cruising with me? I think that'd be fun, and it would strengthen our bonds.”

Emilia: “I'm not sure what cruising is, but I think Subaru would get seasick if we did. That would tire you out, so we should avoid it.”

Beatrice: “Not to mention, the park is right in front of us, in fact. Now isn't the time to give up, I suppose.”

Beatrice pulled on an uncomfortable Subaru's wrist, and led him onwards as she continued to walk forward.

They arrived at the destination without any hesitation, and Subaru gave up any resistance after seeing the entrance to the park.

The fountain located at the center of city's park showed an unexpected spectacle. The audience gathered in the park was larger than yesterday's.

Subaru: “Since we came here earlier, I was prepared for the possibility that Liliana wouldn't be here...”

Seeing the crowd gathered, however, that thought turned out to be just a mere worry.

Today's performance seemed upbeat, with both rallies and applause from fanatical listeners, an atmosphere which dominated the park.

Subaru: "Clapping and yelling?"

Beatrice: "Today looks quite a bit more lively than yesterday, in fact."

Met with the same confusion as Subaru, Beatrice tilted her head to the side.

Although it had been delivered by this morning's magic device, Liliana's singing typically peacefully, quietly drew its audience away from reality. It was precisely because of that nature that the presence of this frenzied crowd seemed off.

The expected situation had been mixed with something unexpected.

Emilia: "Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. She really deserves to be Songstress-san."

Although Emilia was eager to push through the hustle and bustle to have a good look, Subaru had a bad feeling about the entire situation.

As they approached the front of the crowded audience, Subaru began to feel an uneasy sense of regret.

Subaru: "——"

However, he couldn't quite vocalize that feeling, and so Subaru had no excuse to stop.

Not to mention that Emilia was looking forward to the seeing the commotion for herself. After all, Subaru could not betray those amethyst eyes which sparkled with expectation.

Soon after, the fanaticism of the masses turned into a thunderous round of applause as they continued to push through the crowd.

That is to say, the cause of that commotion was coming to an end. The place where the crowd's excited sight was concentrated became visible.

There,

Liliana: "That was a really amazing dance! After seeing this extraordinary dance I started to lose myself!"

Priscilla: "Not at all, your performance and singing were what captured mine attention so completely. Just as it deserved to. It has been a long time since I've seen such a display of skill."

There, talking and shaking hands tightly with each other, were the Songstress and a woman of crimson.

Subaru's intuition had been right.

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Today, Subaru again bore witness to an audience shedding tears to Liliana's playing and singing.

If something today were different from yesterday, it would be the presence of

Priscilla, who stood beside Lilianna, also being showered with “your dance was too powerful”, “so touching”, “I’ll definitely come again”. The recipient of all this generous praise, Priscilla, fanned herself and spread her arms wide in response.

After that rough interaction with their fans, the only people left were Subaru, Emilia, and Beatrice. Noticing their obtrusively idleness, Lilianna’s twintails bounced once more.

Liliana: “Oh, hey! If it isn’t Natsuki-sama and Emilia-sama! And Natsuki-sama’s little girl-sama! What are you all up to?”

Beatrice: “I wouldn’t know who this girl-sama is, I suppose. Subaru, explain it to me, in fact.”

Subaru: “Why don’t we let the one who came up with the name explain it? Here, I’ll give you some tasty candy, so behave.”

Beatrice: “You won’t mmm... fool me like this, I suppose mmm....”

Setting aside Beatrice, who was busy sucking on the sweet in the mouth, Subaru turned to Liliana, whose twin ponytails bounced eagerly like dog tails. Although Emilia exaggeratedly widened her eyes in response, Liliana’s presentation of her odd behavior was only just beginning.

Subaru: “Although it’s only been a day, here you are, staging another grand performance. Were you kicked out by Kiritaka again?”

Liliana: “Eeeh! Well~, that would be right. The one who loved me gave me such an earnest plea, so I complied. Isn’t that the mark of an excellent woman? I think it is.”

Subaru: “So, even after being booted out, you thought that holding a performance would be perfectly fine...”

Liliana straightened her thin chest and stroked a nonexistent moustache. Next to her, Priscilla stood with arms crossed across her ample chest. Catching sight

of Subaru, she snorted at him with contempt.

Priscilla: “What have you been doing? Even if you were taken in by mine allure, resting your gaze upon me like that is incredibly rude. Men who are obsessed with mine beauty are at most allowed to inhale my scent to fuel their sweet dreams.”

Subaru: “I didn’t see your dance, but even if I had I wouldn't have been too excited. I only like delicate type girls like Emilia-tan, so your alluring body doesn’t do much for me.”

Priscilla: “Preferring a half-witch over me is a mark of utter helplessness. Of course, I am not so narrow minded as to accept strange tastes. Moreover, if you can not understand true beauty, then your gaze can only be dismissed as hopelessly short-sighted.”

Subaru sensed a certain futility in attempting to argue with her.

Their values were too different. Subaru couldn’t direct common sense at Priscilla, who genuinely believed that the world itself belonged to her.

Anyway,

Emilia: “An amazing dance’, that is to say, Priscilla was dancing?”

Priscilla: “Feel regret that you missed it. Dancing is not something I do lightly. That is to say, the this artist’s song had something to offer.”

Priscilla presented Liliana to the stunned Emilia.

Subaru was shocked by her answer, while Liliana rolled her eyes at him. Ignoring Liliana, who began to pretend she was blowing bubbles, Subaru stared straight at Priscilla.

Subaru: “You danced for people? That’s completely unexpected.”

Priscilla: “Then, how would you regard the frenzy of that crowd of fools just now? Although that artist’s song did have magic in it, without the presence of mine dance, the audience would have merely fallen into a stupor and become puppets who could only listen. Although that could be said to be a form of enjoyment, I am not fond of it. Fools will remain fools, and the ignorant will remain ignorant. Why not have color added to both mine and their day?”

Subaru: “...in other words, fools indulging in foolishness will be happier?”

Priscilla: “Ho. You’re obviously a commoner, but you’re quite adept at comprehension.” Feeling grateful at Priscilla’s praise would be impossible.

Not to mention that Priscilla showed no sign that she’d remembered that she’d completely forgotten about his existence in the inn. He’d just settle for being fine with Priscilla remembering about Emilia.

Liliana: “But, but, Priscilla-sama and Emilia-sama. So many exciting people are assembled here, I really appreciate it.”

Liliana had withstood the sinister atmosphere and offered that reaction.

She had picked up on the rivalry between the two and had designated herself as the mediator,

rather than the awkward Subaru doing so. Maybe her odd quirks and airheadedness were just a mask. Liliana: “Ehehe. Was my song so beautiful? Honestly, that just embarasses me. Hehehehe.”

Subaru: “Nope, this is her real nature.”

Liliana was blinded by her own praise and fell into a fidgeting embarrassment. Subaru realized he’d overestimated her and slumped his shoulders disappointedly. Then, he suddenly noticed that there was no one around Priscilla.

Subaru: “Are you alone? No Al, or that damn bastard, or the cute butler?”

Priscilla: “I allowed Schultz to go for a walk, but he seems to have gotten lost. He tries very hard, but is a good for nothing at everything he does, that’s the cute kind of child he is. Since Al’s constant nagging is annoying, I sent him out to look for Schultz. As for the damn bastard, I am unsure. Perhaps he’s at a tavern somewhere.”

Subaru: “So ‘damn bastard’ is actually a common language between us...”

Subaru was thrown off by the unexpectedly serious reply. It seemed that Heinkel was poorly received even by his own faction.

Although he fully understood why Heinkel was treated that way, why had Priscilla bothered to invite sometime like that to her faction?

Subaru: “She’d definitely say something like ‘because having him nearby would interesting’, though...”

Priscilla: “You seem to understand quite well. Well, I collected him for some rather small reasons. Those who approach me and attempt to market themselves will be welcomed so long as I can find them a purpose for mine amusement. If they become an obstacle, they can be discarded at any time. That man is, at best, this kind of person.”

Subaru: “No, how do I say this... he doesn’t seem like he’d live up to your expectations in any way whatsoever.”

It seemed as if it was precisely because her expectations had not been met that Priscilla had flown into a violent rage. But perhaps Priscilla had even already long forgotten that event.

Subaru: “But don’t you feel like this is dangerous? At this point in time, I’d

never let Emilia-tan go out alone.”

Priscilla: “Mine attendants are absent, and were I to be in danger, then I would be at a disadvantage. Such a line of thought is only fitting for those who can only gaze at mine back.”

Subaru: “Ah, is that it?”

That was quite a disdainful judgment of Al’s capabilities. However, after seeing Priscilla in action, that perspective was understandable.

At the earlier meal, the ability that Priscilla had demonstrated was superior to humankind. Subaru: “Speaking of which, I’ve also been kicked in the jaw before.”

During the loops that had happened in the capitol, Subaru had once displeased Priscilla enough to have been kicked in the face. His body had flown so high it had hit the ceiling, and he’d landed in the adjacent room.

That severe pain had felt like a broken jaw.

Subaru: “So, you threw Al aside and came to see Liliana?”

Priscilla: “This mere urban landscape has done well to soothe mine boredom. Unlike the narrow structure of the capitol, the city has many a place worth viewing. As I explored, a lovely river of song flowed to me.”

Liliana: “Yeah~, at first when the dancing created a frenzy I really had no clue what would happen. Sometimes there are people who recklessly join my performance and change the mood. Although most of the time my song hits them and they change their minds.”

Subaru: “You really don’t act like the Songstress should at all...”

To just invade a song like that was too bold of a move.

And, indeed, it was rather a shock that Priscilla had joined in with a dance. That the audience had been so taken with it meant that her dancing was on par with the song itself.

Priscilla: “Although it would be a stretch to say you could win hearts and minds like I can, there is in fact a certain value in your voice. How about it? Come to mine side. Let mine influence give you status, and allow me to offer you the honor of playing for mine mansion.”

Liliana: “——”

In other words, Priscilla rather appreciated Liliana's song and gave her an unreasonable demand. Although the idea painted Liliana as Priscilla's personal musician, darker implications behind Priscilla's words were present as well.

If her anger at being unable to win Liliana reached the same level as her appreciation for Liliana's music, what would she do? It was that terrible implication.

Then, Liliana replied,

Liliana: “Thank you very much! That's such an uplifting evaluation, and it makes me really happy! But! but! but! Please allow me to refuse...”

She didn't know about Priscilla's terrible anger, nor was she capable of reading the mood.

With that horrifying ignorance, she rejected Priscilla's proposal with casual enthusiasm. Priscilla: “Ho, you refuse. Why?”

Sure enough, Priscilla's voice lowered, and her gaze darkened.

Shivering. Subaru, who was completely unrelated to the situation between them, felt a blade of cold brush his back.

In one sentence, the atmosphere was about to turn deadly.

In her own world, free of tension, Liliana stroked the box which held her instrument.

Liliana: “I am Liliana, a travelling bard. Although it is true that I am being asked to stay in the city like this, I am a traveler who will return to wandering with the wind sooner or later. Not bound by the land, not bound by others, that is how I serve my profession — such a way of survival that has long been decided.”

Priscilla: “Therefore mine invitation was refused.”

Liliana: “Whether my mother, or her mother, or her mother's mother, my family has always walked that path. We are all people who have chosen to forsake everything that is material so we may live on through song in the hearts of others. No one can capture the wind, just as no one can stop a song. Therefore,”

Priscilla: “——”

Liliana: “Although I am very happy about your invitation, please allow me to refuse. After all, even I can not know where my song will travel, because every decision has been entrusted to the wind.”

Lifting her instrument, speaking proudly, Liliana’s expression bore no trace of hesitation.

Her usual tricky expression was gone, as was her deliberately affected atmosphere that existed to provoke the nerves of others.

There was just a bard — the Songstress who wanted to preserve her stories in song.

After listening to Liliana's reply, Priscilla held one hand aloft and closed one eye. With her other eye, she trained a scorching crimson gaze at Liliana.

Then, at Liliana's unwavering expression, Priscilla suddenly gave a sigh.

Priscilla: “— Excellent. That determination is also pleasing. I will allow it. The vulgar one here seems to have been I.”

Liliana: “No, no, not at all. I am very, deeply sorry.”

Toward Priscilla, whose mouth was on the verge of blooming into a smile, Liliana offered a heartfelt response.

Really, the interaction between the two left Subaru dumbstruck. Squinting at his frozen expression, Priscilla frowned as if displeased.

Priscilla: “What is it, commoner? You seem bothered.”

Subaru: “It's really nothing other than shock. I thought you were going to bisect Liliana after she rejected you and I started to shiver...”

Priscilla: “That's a rather ridiculous worry.”

No such thing would happen, was what Priscilla's “hmpf” indicated.

However, before she had heard Liliana's reasoning, Priscilla had no doubt intended to kill her. Before that decision had been consciously reached, however, Liliana's opportune words had the balance to tilt in a lucky direction. At least, that was how Subaru saw it.

Emilia: "But, I was also a little surprised. Since Priscilla-san seems like a 'I'll take whatever I want' kind of person."

The landmine that Subaru had taken pains to avoid was unexpectedly triggered by Emilia.

Emilia bluntly blurted out her impression of Priscilla. Subaru involuntarily straightened his back and spun around to face Priscilla. But, Priscilla merely closed her eyes, and,

Priscilla: "What foolish words, half-witch. How could your clouded eyes ever judge mine character? There is a limit how many impolite insults I will stand for."

Beatrice: "What an unforgivable girl, in fact. If you have time to muse on the helplessness of others, then you should reflect on yourself and your own demeanor, I suppose. Betty thinks that would be more meaningful to both parties, in fact."

Emilia: "Beatrice..."

As she listened to Priscilla's relentless derision, Beatrice gripped the confused Emilia's hand. Priscilla, however, raised her eyebrows, looking at Beatrice as if noticing her for the first time.

Priscilla: "Such a little girl dares to speak like that. Mine magnanimity is not

determined by age. If you hold the incorrect notion that your youth will spare you mine wrath, you'd best change your attitude right now."

Beatrice: "Your meddling really is unnecessary, I suppose. Watch who you call little girl, in fact. Taking Betty's appearance at face value cost you dearly."

A flame burst into existence between Priscilla and Beatrice.

The two girls dressed in elaborate dresses both looked to be terribly angry.

Although Subaru never doubted for a second that Beatrice would win, he knew that these conflicts were inevitable when the royal candidates met. This was just the type of relationship they had.

Subaru: "Don't be so stubborn, Beako. Priscilla's just volatile like this, and arguing with her is pointless."

Beatrice: "Subaru, do not stop Betty, in fact. Aren't you angry that Emilia is being belittled, I suppose? Show me your masculinity, in fact."

Subaru: "Could you not say such terrible things!? Not to mention..."

Subaru was shocked that Beatrice, who rarely showed concern toward people who weren't him, was angry for Emilia's sake.

Even Emilia, the recipient of that concern, was surprised. Emilia: "Beatrice, I'm fine."

Moving Beatrice's hand out of the way, Emilia gently touched the girl's head. For a second, a tearful expression appeared on Beatrice's face.

But it only lasted for a moment. Beatrice adopted her usual expression as she turned back to Priscilla.

Beatrice: "Be grateful that you've been spared, I suppose." Priscilla: "That's

how you should feel. Thank your own cute face.” Both Beatrice and Priscilla snorted slightly.

Although at the end Priscilla had ended up praising Beatrice’s appearance, the infuriated Beatrice was completely unaware. Anyway, ‘I’ll let you go because you’re cute’ — that was an odd explanation. Subaru didn’t understand at all.

Subaru: “You really are an irrational woman...”

Priscilla: “Of course. Are you so proud that you believe yourself capable of seeing through any woman, let alone I?”

Subaru: “Are you saying it’s my fault...? What really started this incident was you telling Liliana ‘I want you’.”

Priscilla's reasoning for allowing Liliana to escape the palm of her hand remained a mystery. Subaru directed a curious gaze at her. Unexpectedly, Priscilla covered her mouth with her fan.

Priscilla: “Everything in this world is already mine. As such, there is no necessity to hold all that is beautiful and lofty in mine palm. Those things just need to exist. As long as they continue to exist, then there is no problem.”

Subaru: “.....”

Priscilla: “This world is already mine courtyard, that is to say, where a songbird sings is unimportant. Placing her into the cage? Vulgar. Guarding her from an outside enemy's hands? Vulgar. In fact, those are all rather troublesome actions.”

Priscilla’s views drove any of Subaru’s presumptions into the ground. Her alienation from even alienation left Subaru speechless.

That wasn’t to say that Subaru couldn’t understand what she was saying. However, what she saw was just too different from what Subaru saw.

Therefore, Subaru would never understand her for as long as he lived.

Frankly, he thought it was horrible. But maybe it could be seen in another light. This terrible feeling, perhaps, might also inspire admiration or longing in others. Maybe that was exactly why Al chose to follow Priscilla.

Liliana: “Hey, hey, hey! Now that everyone’s calmed down, let me serve as an ambassador and show off goodwill as I show off my voice! Yeah, I’ll do just that!”

In this way, slicing through the atmosphere, Liliana abruptly made her own proposal. She took her lute-lyre and played a quick chord on its strings, before concentrating on swaying her own body along.

Liliana: “Only this time, Priscilla-sama doesn’t need to join in with a dance, just enjoying the song is fine. I will open fire with the full passion of the Songstress! Please listen carefully!”

Priscilla: “Ho?”

Liliana’s words brought an expression of interest to Priscilla’s face.

Liliana: “Emilia-sama seemed to have first arrived as my first song ended. I hope that instead of seeing me as a singer whose selling point is her cuteness, you’ll come to see me as poet who has earned a little bit of money with performance skill.”

Emilia: “Wow, really?”

Liliana: “Although I’m not the most qualified of musicians, I hope you’ll be satisfied.”

Regardless of Liliana's assertion, Emilia was undoubtedly interested in her performance and singing. That was why Emilia, who had been taken in by their previous interaction, looked forward to Liliana’s proposal.

Taking note of the subtle sense of distance between Emilia and Priscilla, Liliana appeared to enter a state of preparation. She discreetly waved Subaru over and said in a quiet voice,

Liliana: “Natsuki-sama, Natsuki-sama. Although this is just my personal opinion, are Emilia-sama and Priscilla-sama on poor terms?”

Subaru: “That’s hardly a matter of opinion, it’s obvious from their exchanges. Besides, Priscilla doesn’t get along with anyone, of course there’s tension with Emilia.”

Liliana: “This is huge!”

Liliana seemed shocked, and her hair jumped like an alert dog’s tail. Were her nerves linked to her hair? He really wanted to reach out and grab it.

Liliana: “So, so, let me come here and cut that tension away, and unite the two in a world of charm and song. Ah! Just now, did your imagination just annoyingly turn somewhere dangerous when I said ‘cut’? That’s no good!”

Subaru: “It's exhausting when you say both inspiring and uninspiring things in one sentence, so don’t do that anymore.”

Subaru marveled at Liliana, who seemed like a madman, yet was capable of caring for others. Sweeping away the bad air with a song, something simple and straightforward.

Both were companions in shared interest to Liliana's singing. Even Priscilla wouldn’t act cynically toward Emilia as she listened to the Songstress she so admired.

Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “No, I don’t think so.”

Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “Is this a parody where I can’t advance unless I say yes?”

Liliana presented that false choice with the same inflection and tone, and Subaru had no choice but to give up and choose “yes”. Liliana’s expression suddenly became open again.

The high degree of difficulty in communication between the human species and the Liliana species had yet to be considered properly.

Subaru: “Alright, I’ll buy some snacks while Liliana sings. Emilia-tan, I’ll be right back, so don’t argue with anyone and wait here quietly, okay?”

Emilia: “Really. You don’t need to worry so much, and besides it wouldn’t happen anyway. I don’t want to fight with Priscilla-san.”

Subaru had cautioned Emilia just to be sure, but she wore a large smile. Although he didn’t doubt Emilia, even if she does not initiate an argument, the presence of Priscilla made the likelihood of one rather high.

Subaru: “Beatrice. If something happens with Emilia-tan, I’ll leave it up to you.”

Beatrice: “I know, in fact. That girl, if she tries to talk again, I’ll turn her into ash, I suppose.” Subaru: “You won’t argue either, right?”

Committing that task to Beatrice, who was much more volatile than Emilia, Subaru prepared to leave the park. But, before that,

Subaru: “Priscilla, is there anything you won’t eat?”

Priscilla: “How unexpected. A commoner like you is actually showing consideration. Well, in that case, prepare something interesting. If you find something boring, I’ll lift you up by your head and slam you down again.”

Subaru: “Guessing what you’d like would be like playing rock-paper-scissors, why’d you have to impose that cruel condition!?”

Subaru thought about giving her the first delicacy he could find. Priscilla being Priscilla frowned at his answer.

Priscilla: “Rock, paper... scissors?” She tilted her head to the side.

Since she’d once forgotten Subaru, maybe she’d forgotten the condition she’d imposed. Already,

Subaru had no idea what to say. She truly was impossible to deal with in every sense of the word.

Emilia: “Subaru, be careful.”

Beatrice: “If anything happens, call for Betty, in fact.”

Sent off by Emilia and Beatrice’s gazes, Subaru waved his hand. Afterwards, he waved his hand and winked at Liliana as if flirting, then ran from the park.

Soon afterwards, Liliana’s light melody came.

Hearing it, Subaru thought of returning to the park as soon as possible. If he didn’t join her solo at all, it wouldn’t work. He injected more power into his running stride.



It had been ten minutes since Subaru left the park. Subaru: "I'm so worthless, really."

After leaving the store, Subaru looked at the contents of his bag and sighed.

In order to procure proper desserts, the errand boy Subaru went for the first suitable store he found and completed his shopping as soon as possible. Although he was intrigued by Pristella's famous delicacy, a rare product called Gina Jelly, he didn't have the courage to bring it back to Priscilla.

Although phrasing it as fearing the of deterioration the relationship between the two factions

sounded nice, what Subaru in fact feared was Priscilla herself.

Subaru: "But, I wonder if this tastes the same as Unagi Jelly. Although I do feel ashamed about lacking the courage to confirm it for myself, I don't quite hate myself."

Subaru whistled at his complicated self-examination, running along the road to the park at a brisk pace.

He'd counted the ten minutes since he'd left, and there had been no change in his contract link with Beatrice.

Even so, his masculine pride bid him to return as soon as possible, but, Subaru: "Gah, sorry."

Turning quickly around a corner, he nearly collided with someone. Although he'd hurriedly avoided them, Subaru turned his head to make sure.

Subaru: "Sorry. I don't think I hit you, but are you good?"

???: "Hey, brother. Are you apologizing? Then you should show me more sincerity!"

The man who Subaru had almost collided with replied in a rough voice, his expression changing as he saw Subaru.

At the same time, Subaru himself was also stunned.

Subaru: "Whoa, is it Chin? You were even hired by Felt, why are you still doing the same foolish things?"

Larkins: "You're so damn annoying! I've told you that it's not Chin! And what are you even doing here!?"

The man who angrily spat those words was yesterday's messenger who'd made a mess of delivering his message. According to what Felt had said, he had supposedly been instructed to spend the night at another hotel in the city.

Subaru: "You're all alone, and not with Ton and Kan? That's really curious."

Larkins: "Curious or whatever, what do you even know about me? There's nothing between us, so why do you keep trying to start something? You're so annoying, goddamn move already."

Subaru: "You're so cold, even though we have a relationship of life and death." Larkins: "I don't remember that kind of thing!?"

Larkins, who was unfamiliar with Subaru, made an irritated face as he tried to avoid him.

Even Subaru himself had trouble understanding why he felt such a kinship.

Perhaps the sensors in Subaru's heart treated Tonchinkan as mortal associates.

So many of the people in this world were ridiculously strong, so facing them would have Subaru breathe a sigh of relief.

Even though they'd obviously once killed him. He was really getting bolder.
Larkins: "Anyway! Don't bother me! I'm working right now!"

Subaru: "The you who used to screw around and mess with people is now doing proper work..."

I'm so happy for you." Larkins: "Who is this!"

As Subaru pretended to weep, Larkins escaped from him and headed for the crowd. Having received a cold reaction, Subaru scratched his head in self-reflection.

If you had the bad habit of not taking the initiative to talk to people, there would also be a lingering sense of distance.

Watching Larkins disappear into the sea of people, Subaru turned toward the park again. And then his feet suddenly stopped.

Subaru: "Hmm?"

Subaru turns his head and begins to feel suspicious.

Before his eyes, in that subtle moment, is the reason that Subaru stopped — there were people who had stopped.

The crowd that Larkins had headed toward were all frozen in their tracks, and Subaru inadvertently followed suit. Larkins curled his lip and pushed his way out

of the crowd.

Larkins: “This guy, that guy, and this guy too! What’re you all looking at!?”

Filled with irritated insults, Larkins also aligned his gaze with the gaze of the masses, which pointed above the roof of a towering building.

An exceptionally tall building, inlaid with a mosaic of crystal engravings, a building that held a bell. In any metropolis or town, this building would be taken for granted. Each city or town would have several of these clock towers.

In the city of Pristella, there were also a number of clock towers scattered about. The clock tower here was merely one of many.

However,

???: “— Gosh, honestly. Please excuse me, I’m very sorry.”

There, a figure stood, staring out from the open window of the clock tower, dangerously close to its edge.

The figure’s attire drew the attention of everyone nearby, and its voice trembled as if bathing in the weight of all that attention.

???: “Thank you. I really only need just a little bit of it, so please let me borrow your time.”

It spoke words of apology, but, compared to genuine words of regret, its words felt far more self-righteous, as if prioritizing its own intentions.

That shivering voice broke, sharply. Listening to it was painful on the ears, and

there was a fierce, desperate need to remove that discomfort immediately.

The reason for that strange feeling could perhaps be traced to that figure's off-putting appearance.

— The figure's head was entirely wrapped in bandages, leaving only its dazzling eyes uncovered. Its body was wrapped tightly with a black jacket, and both wrists were captured by a long chain, the ends of which dragged on ground, swaying both left and right as their owner paced the tower.

It offered the masses a strange gesture — a smile, perhaps, but the bandages concealed and distorted its mouth too much for the expression to be comforting.

???: "My apologies, I'm the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Wrath."

After saying that terrible title, the figure reported its name.

???: "— I am called Sirius Romanee-Conti." With malice, she smiled.

Chapter 19: Theatre of Malice

Those words were spoken with both intimacy and graciousness.

Hearing the bandaged figure's opening speech, the crowd could only gaze up in stunned silence.

The figure standing high above them had a peculiar, striking appearance. Its voice was ear-piercing yet incredibly entrancing.

However, those notable features were secondary to something much greater.

The reason why no one dared to move their eyes from that figure was, in fact, incredibly simple. Calling that reason biological instinct would be no exaggeration.

— No one would be so foolish as to heedlessly look away from a life-threatening enemy.

"Huh, what?"

"What did that person say just now?"

"This a joke, right? The Witch Cult, what's with..."

Delayed understanding gradually spread through the crowd.

However, no one took action. Everyone merely questioned the people near them, as if doubting what they'd heard.

Larkins: "Just now, what did that bastard say? Did you hear it!?" Larkins,

who'd raced back toward Subaru, shared that reaction.

Although he crossed the crowd and approached Subaru while keeping an eye on the clocktower, Subaru, standing at a distance from the crowd, didn't let his gaze waver for even a second.

A disaster would surely occur as soon as he looked away.

That figure's identity being what it was, that was a doubtless fact.

— That is, that figure was a creature from the same species as Petelgeuse.
Subaru: "Also, claiming to be a Romanee-Conti...?"

The bandaged figure had given its name: Sirius Romanee-Conti.

Ridiculously enough, Romanee-Conti was in fact Petelgeuse's surname, although it was impossible for that evil spirit to have blood relatives.

Subaru: "That can't mean that all the cultists share that surname."

An entire family named Romanee-Conti would be far too much of a nightmare to handle.

A wicked religion spreading the teachings of the witch, all under the name of Romanee-Conti? Even the thought seemed distorted and foul.

At the same time, an endless wave of anger rose inside Subaru.

Although this was not the Gluttony that he'd been pursuing, if this was someone who could give him a lead, then,

Subaru: "— I'll try to capture him and force him to explain everything."
Although difficult, that could open a path to Gluttony.

Determined, Subaru calmed his blazing heart, and focused on finding his connection with Beatrice. Beatrice would appear for Subaru as soon as she was summoned.

This was an effect of the contract between a contractor and his spirit.

Deep within himself, Subaru grabbed onto their connection, and prepared to seize it, when, Sirius: “— Alright! That’s enough!”

Subaru: “—!?”

Just as he was about to call Beatrice, a shrill, dry voice called loudly from above.

That voice gave the impression that it could permeate the entire city. The bandaged person clapped his hands, and Subaru opened his eyes to see him watching the crowd beneath him.

Sirius: “Everyone took 22 seconds to fall quiet. However, thank you all for your attention. I'm very happy. In addition...”

Despite the irony in those words, the bandaged person, Sirius, kept his arms crossed as his entire body shook. Although he looked incredibly happy, the friction between the chains hanging from his arms and the walls of the clock tower created an uncomfortable sound.

Sirius: “You and you there, and the two buddies there, and you there too. I'm sorry, but please don’t be so angry. I'm very sorry to take up everyone's precious time. Sorry, and thank you.”

Subaru: “What...”

Sirius twisted his body around, as if he were genuinely complaining.

Subaru had be prepared to yell “what a joke”, but, before the words finished leaving his mouth, he noticed that he’d been included amongst the four people who Sirius had pointed a finger at when he’d said “don’t be angry”.

Looking around, he saw the other people who Sirius had pointed out; they all seemed to possess some amount of skill. A beastman with a sword at his waist, a woman in a blindfold, and Larkins, who each wore a blush.

Those who had been named had all been people who had been prepared to take some action against Sirius. This was a warning that their plans had been seen through.

Subaru: “——”

Subaru felt cold sweat begin to bead his forehead, and he stopped calling for Beatrice.

He’d long understood how terrifying an attack by the Witch Cult was, and knew that survival was everything. In the square around Subaru, no fewer than thirty people had gathered.

If he couldn’t find an advantage somehow, then his situation was already deadly.

Subaru gave a wink to the other four who had been mentioned by Sirius, forming eye contact.

The beastman and blindfolded women both caught his eye, as did a sharp looking city resident. Only Larkins’s face revealed a vague confusion as he looked away from Subaru.

Larkins held the most powerful card; the ability to summon Reinhard.

Yesterday, Reinhard had cautioned Larkins to remember to signal him in case anything happened. So there was a well-established sign between them, and as soon as Larkins used it, Reinhard would come. And as long as Reinhard rushed to the scene, then whether it were with the Witch Cult or Sirius or whatever, any enemy would be cut down without fail.

However, there would certainly be casualties as soon as Larkins made the signal. That was probably what led Larkins to hesitate.

If sacrifices were disregarded, that would be the best way to deal with Sirius.

But did they have to resort to that immediately? Would those sacrifices be worth it?

Sirius: “Okay, thank you. It looks like we’ve all calmed down a little bit. I understand your restlessness. Hearing the name ‘Witch Cult’ didn’t evoke a good impression, did it? So, I didn’t plan to do anything too special. The reason I took everyone’s precious time today is because I wanted to confirm a matter.”

“To confirm... a matter?”

Sirius: “I'm sorry, please don’t chatter so much. My head isn’t too good, so if everyone speaks at the same time, I’ll feel troubled. Then I’ll be very sad. That isn’t good, is it? If there’s anything bothering any of you, please tell me. I’m taking up everyone's time, and I feel very guilty, so no matter what the question is, I’ll answer. Is that okay?”

Sirius, from beginning to end of that speech, spoke in an intimate, rational manner, but that attitude was off-putting, which was a given, considering the sense of disgust people would direct toward a bandaged figure who revealed only his teeth and eyes.

Presumably, everyone thought like this. Even at Sirius's suggestion, the crowd remained silent and eyed the people near them. In that case,

Subaru: "With all due respect, can I ask you a question?" Since no one raised their hand, Natsuki Subaru spoke up.

Subaru, detecting himself at the center of a wave of surprise, kept his gaze fixed intently on Sirius, who looked down to Subaru.

Sirius: "Yes, please do. Thank you. You were someone who got a little angry just now, so I'm very happy that you're willing to talk to me. What do you want to know?"

Subaru: "Although I don't know what's going on here, I'm keeping some girls waiting. Four of them, actually. So it'd be nice if you could let us go as soon as possible."

Sirius: "Oh, my! That's truly terrible, I'm sorry. But I didn't expect that from you. Is it a man's dream to have four girls to serve? That's really bad. Isn't it sad to leave some of them crying? We have to put an end to this unallowable disloyalty that absolutely can't happen that must be completely banned."

Subaru: "H-Hey?" (oi)

Sirius's voice grew more and more energetic halfway through the speech, before dropping into a whisper. However, after hearing Subaru's puzzled voice,

Sirius: "No, no, I just got a little emotional. Sorry. Although I try so hard to remain level headed, I always become unwittingly excited. Thank you for worrying about me. Well... you asked when I'd let everyone go?"

Subaru: "...Ah, that's right. We would appreciate it."

Sirius: "I'm sorry to bother you, I'm really very sorry. But it's okay. Even though I'm in the Witch Cult, I honestly hate troubling anyone. My compatriots often give people trouble, and I feel very sorry about that."

Unexpectedly, dialogue was fairly easy to establish.

A soft waist, an extremely humble attitude, the dialogued they'd exchanged — taking all that into account, could it be that Sirius was a woman?

The bandage rendered that face invisible, and the body was covered with a coat, so it was difficult to discern. The voice was high, but rather than sounding feminine, it sounded mechanical, so that was also difficult to use as a criterion for judgment.

But maybe it was a woman, Subaru thought indifferently.

In fact, judging from Sirius's behavior and attitude, there wasn't any particular danger.

Her abnormal appearance and the way that she'd introduced herself led to several people being on guard, but if these factors were disregarded, then she was easier to talk to than Priscilla.

In the surrounding crowd, the lingering tension gradually soothed, as people watched on curiously, as if waiting for her to make her point.

Subaru did so to, although he still felt slightly nervous.

Sirius: "Thank you. And I'm sorry. It looks like I scared everyone. But I'm very happy that you're all willing to hear me out like this."

Subaru: "It's not like we won't forgive you. But let's get down to business already."

Sirius: "That's right, thanks for reminding me. Let's get down to business. I appeared in front of everyone to affirm something."

Sirius shook her body while rubbing her two chains together, creating a jarring sound.

In fact, rather than being off putting, that action looked entertaining. She seemed much more like a jester or performer than someone dangerous.

Subaru's face eased into a smile, and his apprehension vanished.

He no longer found it necessary to call for Beatrice. He just hoped he could quickly hear Sirius out and leave.

Subaru: "So, what do you want to affirm?"

"Yeah, yeah, hurry up and tell us!" "Yeah, I'm about to be late for work!"

As soon as Subaru urged her on, a pandemonium of chattering began.

One man pointed at the tower Sirius was occupying and burst into laughter.

As the whirlpool of laughter spread, Subaru couldn't help but relax even further. Sirius looked like she'd lost to the atmosphere and put a troubled hand on her head.

Sirius: "Sorry, I'm sorry. Really sorry. I know everyone is busy. I will finish my speech immediately, so please stay with me for a while."

Subaru: "So tell us already!"

Sirius: “Okay! Well, I’ll say it. The matter I want to affirm is very simple. To put it bluntly, there’s something I want to affirm about Love. Wow, that was embarrassing.”

Although the bandages should have covered up any blushing, Sirius covered her face with a hand, trying to cover her shame up. As everyone laughed silently and infectiously, Sirius’s appearance began to seem increasingly out of place.

Sirius: “Although I expected that I’d be laughed at, it still makes me feel troubled. Thank you for listening to me. Thank you, and I also have a request.”

Subaru: “Request?”

Sirius: “I think, if everyone can stay with me for a while, I can affirm that Love. I’m sorry, I can really say some unruly things.”

Sirius stumbled through her words, rubbing her hands and chains together as she made her suggestion.

Faced with such a lovable sight, the crowd reacted with a “what, is that all?”. Subaru also crossed his arms, nodded as he felt the joy spread through the crowd.

Sirius lit up and began clapping her hands.

Sirius: “Really? Thank you, thank you! I’m sorry. The world is really very gentle. Full of love and tenderness. Whenever I understand this, I cannot help but to want to express my gratitude. People are able to understand each other and care for each other. Maybe I always speak with ‘thank you’ and ‘I’m sorry’ so that I can confirm that.”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it, Sirius! So what next—?”

Sirius: “Ah, I’m sorry!”

The blindfolded female adventurer had cheered at Sirius. As if hearing the voice of a classmate who'd she'd been friends with for a decade, Sirius caught her gaze and began laughing with her.

Then, as if finally remembering her purpose, Sirius retreated into her clock tower and reached out a hand. Then,

Sirius: "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. Well, come here."

???: "———!"

She spoke with a friendly voice as she pulled someone through a window.

A little figure moaned and writhed in her grip — a little boy whose entire body was bound.

He was only about ten years old, and his entire body, from ankles to shoulders, was wrapped around with a chain. He was also gagged with that chain, the corners of his mouth dripping blood. Only his neck and above were free, and he desperately moved his head, crying as if pleading for something.

Sirius: "I'm sorry that you're so scared. However, as a man, crying like this isn't good. Although I wanted to keep that a secret for you, you look like you're about to urinate yourself. It's a hard feeling, and it's sad when everyone can see it."

???: "Mmm! Mmgh!!"

"Yes—! It's so very embarrassing!" "If you're a man then don't cry!"

“Men only cry three times in their lives, and even then for only a moment!”

As Sirius coaxed the crying boy, the crowd below mocked that little boy.

Everyone had gone through a period of time where they cried over little things, so their teasing wasn't malicious, but their lack of thoughtfulness was a clamor.

Sirius: “Alright, that's enough, everybody! It's true that this child is a little clumsy, but he's in fact very brave. Isn't that right, Lusbel-kun?”

Lusbel: “———!”

The teenager, who was bound by chains, couldn't have been light, but Sirius held him up with one hand as she reproached the crowd while stroking his head.

Lusbel, as the boy was so called, desperately moved his head as if to place distance between himself and Sirius's face.

That sight was rather humorous, and although knowing that it would be demeaning to the boy, the crowd still unconsciously laughed.

Sirius: “Excellent. Well, please pay attention. My apologies. This is Lusbel, a nine-year-old boy who lives in Pristella. His family name is Kallard, so his full name is Lusbel Kallard.”

Lusbel: “Mmph! MMPH!!”

Sirius: “His father is named Muslan Kallard. Muslan-san works to maintain the stability of the waterways. Ina Kallard, Lusbel-kun's mother, is pregnant. Her stomach has just started to grow larger, and so Lusbel-kun is looking forward to having a younger brother or sister. The Kallard family lives on Third Street. They often go to the city park with a family friend, Tina. Lusbel-kun and Tina-chan are childhood sweethearts, and they love each other dearly. Lusbel-kun's dream is to have Tina-chan stand at his side and support him. Tina-chan is a girl with pale blond curls, and her growing beauty as she blossoms into adulthood is much

anticipated. That Tina-chan also wants to support Lusbel-kun's dream. Upon hearing of the song Delphin Betrayed by the Sunset, Lusbel-kun wanted to become an adventurer just like Delphin. It's a very commendable dream for a boy of his age. Although there may be people who would laugh at that childish dream,

I wouldn't do so at all. Who could laugh at that manly spirit? I believe that Tina-chan also thinks so, which is why she gives Lusbel-kun her heartfelt support. Right, although Lusbel-kun's dream is to be an adventurer, he's also really looking forward to meeting the child inside his mother.

His original plan was to immediately embark on the journey of adventure, but he put it on hold out of consideration for his newborn brother or sister. Because of the large difference in their ages, that child will certainly be very much loved. Lusbel-kun is a good kid who is considerate of others, so I think he will be a very good brother. I would also be happy if everyone could support Lusbel-kun's feelings. Ah, yes, we can't forget about Tina-chan. In fact, the one I originally wanted to bring here was Tina-chan rather than Lusbel-kun, because I think girls are closer than boys to the kind of Love that I want to affirm. However, my heart was impressed by Lusbel-kun's desperate pleas. Sorry, I'm not a very strong-willed person. So I changed my mind... ah, although, being temperamental is just my usual attitude. When I talk about my love, I speak wholeheartedly. Oh, how annoying, I'm so embarrassed. Really, my business doesn't matter. We should be focusing on Lusbel-kun and Tina-chan. Because they already love each other so much, I do not know how much they'll come to adore to each other in the future, so separating them would make me very, very sad. So I decided that I'd respect Lusbel-kun's feelings and help him. So, although Lusbel-kun was just slightly scared and even cried a little, he's really a very brave child. Thanks, and, I'm sorry. I've finished talking in a way that's convenient for everyone."

Lusbel: "Mmph! Mmmph! Mmgh!"

Listening to that child's, to Lusbel's, life, everyone understood and agreed.

It turned out that, although mixed with a little bit of shame, Lusbel's courage was indeed commendable. With that in mind, Subaru wanted to hit himself for having such a ridiculous, demeaning thought earlier.

But this was not the occasion to blame himself. Showing support for the boy was far more important than taking the time to be self-deprecating.

And so,

Subaru: "Lusbel, don't cry! You're the best!"

Subaru shouted loudly, praising the courage of the young boy's tears.

Knowing the true courage buried under those tears, how could he laugh at that shame? Larkins, who stood next to Subaru, joined in the encouragement.

Larkins: "Yeah, don't cry anymore! You're a man, right!? If so, show us your handsome side, kid!"

"Yeah, listen well, Lusbel! You're Pristella's pride!" "Lusbel—! Amazing—! You'll be a great man!"

The audience cheered up, and everyone present began clapping.

That was not only a scene of praising a young man's dedication and courage, but also a beautiful scene showing the kindness of human nature.

No matter how weathered or desperate one appeared, what matter was their will to protect what they valued, and that light was what attracted people to them. For such a revelation, they could only pray.

Sirius: “Ah... thank you, thank you, thank you! Ah, this is amazing! I believed that we could all understand. I knew everyone would praise Lusbel-kun’s courage. Because, he demonstrated the will of Love with it! If you know him, you will love him. Because of this mutual understanding, everyone now has an in-depth understanding of each other's Love!”

“Sirius—! Thank you, thank you so much!” “Lusbel-kun—!!”

Sirius’s eyes widened as tears began to flow freely. Seeing the bandage around her eyes becoming stained with those tears, Subaru felt something hot welling in his own eyes.

His shoulder was gently nudged. Larkins, who stood by his side, was laughing at the crying Subaru. However, the tears in his eyes, even as he smiled, didn’t escape Subaru’s notice.

Looking around, the surrounding groups of people also seemed to share their emotions. Subaru thought of watching the World Cup. When the world the world stood together, people always wanted to share their joy with those who they weren’t were acquainted with.

And now, that peace and understanding was gradually spreading. There was indeed a solid bond.

Sirius: “Our inability to understand each other creates barriers between us. Our minds being unable to empathize leads to antagonism. Our inability to reach conclusions has us giving up on one another. That’s all very heartbreaking. In fact, it’s a tragedy. But now, everyone, are you sad? Do you feel heartbroken?”

“Not at all! Sadness or whatever, none of us feel that way!”

Sirius: “Thank you! So, do you feel happy? Does everyone feel happy?”

“Of course! It’s been a long time since I've been so happy! Thank you, Sirius! You’ve worked so hard, Lusbel!”

With a splash, a whirlpool of applause formed, giving birth to a circle of gratitude for the exalted Lusbel. Now, the only focus of anyone here was in one place, thanks to the two standing on the clock tower.

Lusbel twisted his body and sobbed, finally opening his mouth, disregarding the chain and screaming through his broken teeth,

Lusbel: “Gu, gah! Wake up, save—! Please, ...me! Hel... hk!”

Sirius: “I want to commend your courage, your love, Lusbel-kun! Please look below. Everyone, so many people are affirming your feelings! Ah, thank you! I'm sorry, Lusbel-kun. Although you were a last resort, I just want to affirm this scene. Ahh, ahh, the world is so gentle!”

Sirius held Lusbel tightly in her arms.

In the face of this beauty, thunderous applause began. Subaru put his hand to his mouth and whistled. The recipient of that warm applause, Lusbel, stared in surprise.

That was a man who had struggled his hardest. Even if he had no strength left to even cry, not a person laughed at him.

Sirius: “Sure enough, there it is. We have Love. It existed, here. Everyone's heart is one, and in

a scene of joy as well. We do not need tragedy. We are tired of a world which would have us cry. No one wants such a world. If our hearts want to connect,

then they should do so through sharing joy and happiness. Whether it be tragedy! Or Wrath! We don't need any of it!"

"That's right! Tragedies or whatever, we don't want any of it!"

Sirius: "Ah, that forbidden Wrath that causes hearts to tremble so! Rage, that passion! If that passionate sin is rooted in our hearts, if we are unable to unroot that retribution, then we should fill it with joy! At this moment, everyone's heart is connected as one!"

Sirius cried loudly, and once again lifted Lusbel into the air.

However, the movement did not stop there. Sirius, bathing in everyone's admiration, tossed Lusbel into the air.

Sirius: "Please give! Thunderous applause!" Crowd: "—"

Sirius had given the flying Lusbel the best possible stage.

Watching the young boy soaring through the sky, as if flying into the sun, Subaru led the crowd into a round of applause.

Roaring thunderous applause, a heavenly blessing to Lusbel, who skated through that sky.

That little body spun and spun, but as soon as it reached the top of its trajectory, it began to arc downward. Lusbel headed straight to the ground.

The panicked crowd, vacating where he was about to fall. That was the triumph of a hero.

Endless applause, praise for the falling boy.

“MMMMMMM!!”

Lifting his head and seeing the ground rushing toward him, Lusbel moaned.

He desperately wriggled his small body that should have been exhausted, wanting to do anything that he could to avoid that rock solid ground, tirelessly fighting to his last moment.

Everyone shed tears at seeing the unwavering tenacity of humankind. Then, Sirius: “— Ah, the world is so gentle!”

Before the fierce collision, Sirius let out a shout.

The applause of the crowd, who heard that voice, became louder and louder — Crowd: “——”

As if eggshells had fallen to the ground, the sound of something breaking echoed, and everyone’s field of vision was dyed red.

The whole body was crushed by the hard ground, Lusbel’s body, which had once contained the breath of life, became a splatter of flesh in the square.

— But just after seeing that scene,

Crack.

The sound of breaking eggshells echoed like a round of applause. The square became a pool of red.

That was an ending.

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Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru blinked at the dark skinned girl in front of him.

She put on a clumsy, flirtatious attitude as she stuck out her tongue and scratched her cheek.

As if in a trance, he turned his head to see a smiling silver-haired girl who was watching him from nearby, and a red-haired woman wearing an impudent attitude. And then a petite girl who held his hand—

Liliana: “...ah, ah, what’s going on? Ignored? Are you ignoring me!? P-Please stop it, don’t look at me with that bitterness. Ah, ah, stop it, stop it... d-don’t sigh like that after hearing my song... don’t look so disappointed, forgive me... hk”

Faced with his silence, the girl in front of him, Liliana, shuddered as if remembering something she was unwilling to recall.

Witnessing this situation, Subaru said bluntly,

Subaru: “...I feel sick.”

Liliana: “Huh!? Did that actually just happen!? Looking at a girl’s face so intently, at such a close distance, and the first thing you say is that you feel sick!

I, Liliana, am even more ashamed of Natsuki-sama than your mother is!”

Liliana pretended to be tearful, turning her face away, still keeping an eye on Subaru’s reaction, but Subaru couldn’t even notice her annoying attitude. He shook as he stood, and couldn’t help but collapse on the ground.

Emilia: “Subaru? What’s wrong?”

Beatrice: “What’s wrong, I suppose. Subaru? Subaru?”

Beatrice, who was holding his hand, and Emilia, who stood nearby, looked down at Subaru with concern. Subaru grew so pale that the two couldn’t help but hold their breath.

Subaru: “—I feel sick.”

It had been a year since he’d Returned by Death, and the overwhelming incident that had just preceded his Death left him on the verge of vomiting as he held his shaking knees.

Thus, the spiral of Death began once more.

This time, the cycle of nightmares was staged in the city of Pristella.

— Once again, the curtain rose.

Chapter 20: Shared Empathy

Squatting on the ground, breathing heavily, Subaru finally resisted the urge to collapse.

Emilia and Beatrice surrounded him, wearing looks of concern, and even Liliana seemed worried. Priscilla seemed faintly interested, cooling her face with her fan.

Bathed in their concerned voices and gazes, Subaru gradually reoriented himself.

Feeling like time was slowly accelerating back to normal, Subaru realized what the taste in his mouth was.

He was reminded of switching channels on a TV.

There was no sense of a loss of smell, taste, or sight, but his surroundings had suddenly disintegrated into powder, and transformed into something entirely different.

Subaru's eyes, ears, nose, and skin had all adapted to the new world, but his consciousness could not forget the previous channel, so there was a sense of violation.

All he could do was ignore it, to chew, chew, chew, and swallow the sense of unease that came from switching channels until it was finally over.

Subaru: “——”

Subaru clenched his teeth and finally climbed to his feet.

He shook his head and looked around. The park full of bright sunshine, fountains and green lawns, and a colorful spread of flowerbeds.

Subaru was presently surrounded by four beautiful girls — Emilia, Beatrice, Liliana, and Priscilla. He'd heard Liliana's words twice now.

Emilia: “Are you alright, Subaru? Your complexion doesn't look so good.”

Subaru: “...Emilia-tan. Just now, did Liliana say that she'd sing another song?”

Liliana: “Where do I even start!? I, Liliana, was ignored to such a degree that this situation shocked and hurt my heart! Compensation! I demand compensation!”

As she spoke, Liliana seized Subaru's sleeves in a frenzy, declaring a lawsuit, only to be shaken off by Subaru. He ignored the indignant “hey!” the Songstresses issued and turned to Emilia, who seemed to pick up on Subaru's seriousness.

Emilia: “Yes. Liliana said that she'd sing us another song that we missed. Then Subaru and Liliana started quietly chatting about something.”

Subaru: “That happened just now? I got it, thanks... thank you.”

Thank you. Just saying those words, he felt an unspeakable sense of disgust.

Subaru couldn't help but raise a hand to cover mouth. Seeing him in this state, Emilia made a puzzled frown.

Emilia hadn't done anything wrong. Needless to say, his appreciation wasn't a bitter one. However, it evoked the painful memories of the previous world.

Subaru: "So, this means that I..."

Died, he finally realized, but he was unable to vocalize the word.

— Natsuki Subaru had died.

After he died, he returned again from the time he said goodbye to the world. Although he was relieved at his successful return, remorse also rose in his chest. Obviously, Subaru should have been so fully awake.

In that forest a year ago, in Sanctuary, during the Trial, Natsuki Subaru had resolutely rejected

Death, and the grievances that accompanied it.

But he had still died. And so easily, too. Without resistance, without a sense of defiance, without even awareness.

Why was that? The situation had obviously been abnormal, obviously this is a fact, but even Subaru himself had no clue what had happened. He'd clearly experienced it himself, but he couldn't rationalize any of it.

Subaru hadn't even realized how abnormal that situation had been. And it wasn't only Subaru. Everyone present had been afflicted with the same madness as him.

They'd obviously seen the chained up, howling boy, but they had all frenziedly cheered for his solidarity. Not to mention the insane round of applause that had accompanied the child's fall.

Exactly what had triggered all of that?

And when Subaru had witnessed all that, how exactly had he died?

He hadn't been able to recognize an agent for his Death and, even now, he couldn't find one. Or perhaps it had been in front of him all along, and he'd failed to see it as a threat.

But he couldn't trust anything he'd felt then. Although he'd registered the abnormality of the situation after he'd died, until that very moment, he hadn't been able to think clearly.

How had he died, in the end?

Were there any explosives attached to the boy's body? They could have exploded upon his impact with the ground, taking everything with them. In fact, that was almost exactly like the memory of this death.

It was all very vague. His memory at the instant of his Death was greatly blurred by his madness at the time. Even if he were completely calm now, the state of mind he'd been in at the time prevented him from being able to rationalize that memory at all.

If Subaru had been in a state of madness then it would be virtually impossible to remember what had actually happened.

Emilia: "Are you really okay, Subaru? Even Liliana's wearing such a bothered expression."

Liliana: "I'm not doing anything so pointless. How Natsuki-sama thinks of me doesn't make me sad at all, so please don't get the wrong idea."

Emilia: "See? It's so obvious that it's really bothering you."

Even the clueless Emilia had seen through Liliana's brazenness. Through their

dialogue, Subaru remembered his current situation.

Subaru, at this point in time, was supposed to take advantage of Liliana's song to go run an errand and buy reconciliation sweets. And shortly after buying something, he'd met the monster who was called Wrath.

— There were less than fifteen minutes before that nightmare of a speech would occur.

Subaru: "You're kidding me..."

In his experience with Return by Death, never had the time between the save point and the death been so close together.

Time ranging from a few hours to a few days, that was what Return by Death had always given Subaru in the past. The time he had now was short, almost to the extreme.

In just fifteen short minutes, what could Subaru do?

But even while he puzzled over this, time flowed on.

In this situation, merely avoiding death would be incredibly simple. Subaru only needed to avoid the place where the speech would be delivered. That way, the cause of death, such as the possible bomb, wouldn't affect him.

It was incredibly unlikely that a bomb affecting the entire city had been prepared.

So, if Subaru only wanted to live, he could just not go. Sirius wouldn't appear near Subaru. There didn't seem to be any specific target, and Subaru just happened to be there.

Therefore, even if Subaru weren't present, that square would still be Sirius's crime scene. The speech that was unrelated to Subaru's presence would happen in its original location, and everyone there would be affected.

However, no matter how that turned out, that falling child would be doomed to die. Subaru: "I have to stop it... damn, I have to...!"

Subaru scratched his head and arrived at a decision.

He couldn't not save him. That child, Lusbel, was looking forward to a newborn brother or sister, and had taken his childhood sweetheart's place on that tower. How could anyone be so shameless as to think only of themselves and not attempt to rescue him? Subaru: "Beako and I..."

Will go together, Subaru hesitated to declare. Beatrice: "And what, Subaru?"

Turning to face Subaru, Beatrice voiced a serious question.

Now that he knew a critical situation was imminent, bringing Beatrice with him was the obvious option to choose in terms of combat effectiveness.

If she were absent, Subaru's combat strength would be cut in half. Even so, Subaru hesitated. It wasn't for a sentimental reason like not wanting Beatrice to fight.

Of course, saying that that wasn't a consideration at all wouldn't be true, but it wasn't Subaru's key reason.

That would be Emilia. Or rather, leaving Emilia here.

Subaru: "——"

The Witch Cult was in this very city.

Those fanatics — although he had yet to know whether or not that phrase should be plural, at least the Archbishop of Wrath was present. He had no clue as to whether or not she was working with any other cultists.

However, in a city where the Witch Cult was active, the notion of leaving Emilia alone with no one to protect her left lingering anxiety in Subaru.

Leaving someone important in a place beyond his reach was far too dangerous.

Someone beyond sight, the Witch Cult's devilish hands would reach or those important people will reach out to the key terrorist.

Deep in his heart, turbid fear plagued Subaru.

And, taking Emilia to Wrath? That was out of the question. Having Emilia encounter the Witch Cult would undoubtedly lead to tragedy. Only that was certain.

Just recalling Petelgeuse made that clear. Subaru couldn't let Emilia near the Witch Cult. That wasn't a matter of why. That just was.

Subaru: "Beatrice and I..."

Beatrice: "And what, Subaru?"

Subaru: "We'll eat the same dessert, is that fine?" Beatrice "...?"

Beatrice frowned as she heard Subaru. She probably suspected that he had

been thinking something else entirely. Subaru nodded at the lost looking Liliana and turned to Emilia.

Subaru: "I'll go on a short trip to buy some sweet snacks, then I'll be right back. Emilia-tan, just wait here while elegantly and steadily listen to Liliana's song and be good."

Emilia: "I got it. But don't you want me to come?" Subaru: "That's fine, believe in me. I'll protect you."

At his words, Emilia blinked her wide eyes and nodded with a blush. Then, Subaru quietly beckoned Beatrice, who treated him with a suspicious gaze."

Subaru: "Protect Emilia for me. If I need your strength, I'll call you immediately."

Beatrice: "...what did you encounter that you can't even tell Betty about?"

Subaru: "Just be well prepared. If I come calling, regardless of whether or not you're willing to face it, we'll be in a pretty terrible situation."

Subaru gently pinched the slightly displeased Beatrice's nose, then waved and took off as he felt the eyes of four people on his back.

Running down the road, he reached the square in less than five minutes.

However, his departure time had been a little late. In this strained situation, the slightest difference in timing could be a matter of life and death.

Subaru: "Although this is the case, without shopping, I'll have nearly ten minutes..."

Subaru slowed into a walk, and surveyed the square where he'd arrived.

Before, he'd focused on the tower and didn't have a chance to observe the surrounding area, but, at least for now, no conspicuous, black clad strangers were anywhere to be seen.

Then, the sin archbishop was most probably acting alone.

Subaru: "The question is what to do next. Once that speech begins, I could very well be forced to fall into that hazy state of mind again."

Since the origin of that anomalous space was unclear, once it captured him again, he had no idea if he could regain his senses. Thus, Subaru assumed that it would become impossible to recognize the anomaly as anomalous due to the frightening power of the brainwashing.

Subaru: "Should I tell everyone to take refuge somewhere away from here? It'll be like the situation with Petelgeuse... no, there's not enough manpower, and if Sirius acts preemptively in the meantime, that would be self-defeating."

He could ask the victims who shouldn't be involved in the situation to take refuge. But how would he accomplish that? After all, if Sirius's speech didn't have any particular target, then she wouldn't limit the location to this square.

If there were no audience here, she'd just go elsewhere. As a result, the incident would only unfold to a different set of victims.

Subaru: "In that case, the only way is to eliminate the culprit...!"

His primary advantage was knowing that Sirius planned to appear here.

This was very similar to the battle with Petelgeuse and his sect. No matter what, the Witch Cult couldn't be allowed to run free. To prevent the evil cult from carrying out their crimes meant that the fundamental causes needed to be

eliminated. Otherwise, tragedies would only repeat themselves.

He had realized far too late.

If he'd come to this conclusion immediately, Subaru would not have come alone. It was already too late to return to the park.

He wondered if it would be possible to return to the hotel, to turn to Wilhelm or Julius for help.

Subaru: "Wasting time on these thoughts is useless. I'm the only one here now. As soon as the speech starts, I have to be ready to act... no, the solution is actually much simpler!"

Subaru had noticed a small window at the bottom of the tower, which was presumably where Sirius had entered to give her speech from above.

In that case, she should already be in the tower, preparing for her speech that would be happening shortly. Even if she wasn't, Lusbel himself might be bound in there, awaiting rescue.

So, Subaru glanced cautiously to his left and right, and quietly approached the inconspicuous iron gate, opened, and slipped inside the tower.

The inside of the clocktower was dark beyond compare, its frigid air filled with dust.

The entire tower was entirely silent. Unlike clock towers from his world, this one had no gears. The timekeeping mechanism was run entirely by magical stones, and those produced by the brilliance of the magic filling the atmosphere. That gradual change would be reflected in a change in the color of

tower's crystals.

— Therefore, the only sound that would ever be heard inside the tower would be made by someone else.

???: "...Mmgrr!"

???: "No need to cry so noisily. Are you a good boy? You must be a strong child. Daddy Muslan and Mommy Ina, and your younger sibling too, they must be so proud of what a strong boy you are. You're such a good kid."

An unpleasant voice echoed. Terrified childish whimpers echoed.

A sound accompanied the sobbing from the top of the spiral staircase. It sounded like a grudge, a blessing, a hate, and a love.

It was distorted. It was twisted. It could never be said to be normal. Subaru: "——"

Subaru determined that this was indeed Sirius, inhaled deeply, then held his breath.

His heartbeat began to accelerate, his chest thudding as he ascended the steps. Fortunately, the stairs were stone. With care, he could silence his steps, especially since the enemy's attention should be focused elsewhere.

Subaru prepared to call for Beatrice at a moment's notice as he slowly climbed the stairs. The tension escalated as the sound coming from above grew louder and closer.

Although the tower itself is high enough that Subaru needed to crane his head to see the top, there wasn't anything particularly notable on the journey up. A large pillar sat in the center of the tower, and the spiral staircase encircled it.

The voice of a demon and hero came from the end of those stairs. Only one single window faced the outside of the tower, presumably to give people access to adjust and check the engraved carvings on the magical stones. The sound came from the space before that window.

That feeling was comparable to an attic.

Subaru stealthily peered out from under the stairs and saw that there were indeed two stray figures interrupting that silent darkness.

There was no one else. No fodder cultists seemed to be present.

— Then, Subaru also needed to be prepared for her to attempt to displace his own soul.

Subaru: “——”

Capturing her alive wouldn't be a possibility.

Although that was what he'd wanted to do, the degree of difficulty would be too high. Not to mention that as long as she were alive, who knew what kind of tricks she could pull?

Subaru crouched down, and put his hand on his waist.

He grabs hold of what was supported by his belt and yanks it loose.

In his two handed grip was a weapon with an elongated, curved end, woven from special fibers.

The weapon was commonly known as a bullwhip, and archeologists in some of his world's most famous movies had been known to carry them while exploring ruins.

Whips had a longer range and were more difficult to manipulate than movies had made them seem, but in the past year, under Clind's tutelage, Subaru's skill had vastly improved.

His reasoning for choosing the whip was simple.

Unlike swords, hammers, spears, and bows, the whip was incredibly versatile. More importantly, with weapons like the sword, Subaru's potential improvement in just a few short years was incredibly limited.

Subaru already had a little familiarity with swordplay in kendo, and knew exactly how difficult it would be for him to reach any heights using that weapon.

Therefore, Subaru chose neither the spear nor the sword, but the whip. Originally, he'd always relied on his smarts, creativity, and trickery to win.

In that case, a weapon that played to his strengths would allow him to better exert his power. Whips would also allow him attack from a farther range.

Subaru: “——”

Subaru inhaled gently and exhaled slowly. Then he held his breath again.

He stood up and continued to climb the stairs, clutching the whip with his right hand. The figure hidden in the shadows didn't detect him. That gave him the upper hand.

Subaru took a half-step forward and flung his arm upward. With a sharp whistle, the tail of the whip flew toward its target.

This preemptive sideways attack, which sought to prioritize its curved, angled speed over power, seemed to mirror a move in badminton.

The head of the snake cut through that air, biting toward its target's unprotected back, trying to down that wicked figure.

However,

Sirius: "Why are you so angry?"

The silhouette whose back was facing him replied in a distracted voice.

Immediately thereafter, she swung her right hand at lightning speed to deflect the blow from Subaru's whip, using the chains that hung around her arm.

It was as if one snake had soared through the sky to intercept another.

For a second, Subaru was stunned by that sight, but recovered and tilted his arm to the edge as he determined that the front of the whip had indeed made contact with its prey.

Sirius: "Oh, my?"

With a little giggle, the collapsed figure, Sirius, regained her balance and climbed to her feet.

Although the chain dangling from her right arm deflected Subaru's blow, the whip bit into part of the chain's locks, dragging Sirius to the ground as Subaru yanked.

Subaru: “H-Ha!”

Facing that struggling Sirius, Subaru further tightened his grip as he rushed toward that bandaged freak in a semicircle, ramming into her with a shoulder. Her body, which was lighter than expected, easily flew forward under his body mass.

Sirius: “Mn, Gah!”

Sirius gave a soft cry, and, after thudding onto ground, tumbled through the window, just as Subaru had planned. From here to the first floor was much more than ten meters high, a child who fell to the ground from here would be crushed.

Subaru: “Are you okay, Lusbel!?”

Subaru did not confirm Sirius’s impact, instead running to the other figure on the floor. That small body belonged to Lusbel, who held the ends of a chain in both hands, gazing up at Subaru with fear.

The chain in his hand was connected to the chain wrapping around his entire lower body, another expression of Sirius’s bad taste.

Subaru: “That guy...! Forcing you to tie yourself up...!”

Little by little, he realized the extent of the horror that Lusbel must have tasted, being forced to hold that chain against his neck. Even now traces of terror were still engraved in his face.

Once aware of that maliciousness, Subaru felt an uncontrollable anger. He immediately grabbed the boy’s shoulders, taking the chain from him.

Subaru: “Enough! You’ll be fine. You’ll never have to do such a thing again.

Come with me!”

Lusbel: “But, if... I, I don’t follow, the terms of our agreement, then Tina... Tina will...!”

Lusbel replied, eyes watering and lips quivering.

Seeing him, Subaru’s throat became choked with emotion.

That child had, in an attempt to protect his childhood friend, agreed to the devil's transaction. And, even experiencing what he had, Lusbel was more worried about his friend than he was about himself.

Even though his legs trembled, even though his teeth chattered, even though his vision was blurred by tears, even though he was no longer capable of forming coherent sentences.

Subaru: “No. In this city, there are... many... reliable people.” His hoarse voice was unable to convey say what he wanted to say.

In order for the youth to feel at ease, he needed to speak comforting, authoritative words. The Sword Saint was in the city right now. As were the Knight of Knights, and the kingdom’s leading healing, and various people who could destroy a city.

Therefore, there was no need for any fear. No evil forces could rampant. Yeah. Exactly. Fear was completely unnecessary. There was no need for it at all. And, so,

Subaru: “So... legs, stop, shaking!!”

In front of Lusbel, whose eyes had become unfocused from fear, Subaru desperately beat his unresponsive legs and yelled.

His voice, laced with grief, unexpectedly echoed and compounded the fear residing in his chest. Subaru felt as if there were a sense of disgust, with an unidentified origin, entangling his entire body.

Lusbel: “— Guuhk”

Lusbel vomited with a sound like the bursting of a bubble. He started to spasm as he exhaled, collapsing in a pool of his own vomit. Subaru wanted to help him up, but then he too felt as if own organs were being twisted inside him, and he spewed out the contents in the stomach, feeling as if he'd been thrown into flight.

The grilled meat he'd eaten in the morning had become unrecognizable, and the acrid, visceral smell of his gastric acids were overwhelming. Gulping, Subaru continued to retch vigorously, tasting only pain as his vomit threatened to drown him.

While he vomited and vomited, dizzily, tinnitus ringing in his ears, his was still shivering non-stop. Not from cold. An invisible hand was twisting his stomach, his internal organs being knocked askew. Subaru was aware of its origin.

They were, undoubtedly,

Sirius: “— Your fear is but proof of your gentleness.”

Hearing the gentle voice coming from behind him, Subaru vomited again.

Almost drowning in the fluid overflowing from his stomach, Subaru collapsed onto the dirtied ground. He felt a touch of slimy liquid on his cheek. He was so close to the accumulation of filth on the ground that, every once in awhile, a short breath led to the bursting of a yellow bubble.

Most people wouldn't be able to bear such a terrible sight, yet she gazed it at

with a soft smile.

While Subaru and Lusbel looked at each other, desperately struggling to breathe in their own vomit, wracked by invisible tremors,

Sirius: “People are able to understand each other. People can become one. Gentleness does not exist for one’s self. It exists for others. Gentleness only shines because it exists for the sake of others. Only being gentle to yourself, that is selfishness! So, your gentleness, existing for the sake of others, is worthy of reverence! Ah, ah, this is Love!

Subaru: “Gu, ah, hk...”

Sirius: “Please feel comfortable. Let me witness. Feel, and let me witness your Love. Your endless tenderness. Your virtue that bid you to save Lusbel-kun!”

As she spoke, Sirius broke into a dance as she gazed at the two, both lying in a pool of vomit. She crossed her arms with one hand pointing to Subaru and the other to Lusbel, shaking her waist. As if dancing. As if offering a tribute.

Sirius: “Lusbel-kun’s fear, you two gentle souls will feel together. You’ll feel Lusbel-kun’s fear, and, through that, Lusbel-kun’s feelings will pass to you. Lusbel-kun, through your fear, feels what you will feel again from him. Your fears once again felt, and Lusbel-kun’s own fear is compounded. Your compounded fears, felt by Lusbel-kun, will in turn compound your own fear. That fear, mixed with Lusbel-kun’s fear, will become a brand new, fresh fear, and the freshness of Lusbel-kun’s fear will again passed to your true fear. The true fear that you feel, and the second fear born through Lusbel-kun, will lead to the his fear, and the next level of fear generated by Lusbel-kun’s heart will be added to your own new greatest level of fear...”

Something was whispering into his ear. That overwhelming momentum

approached nonsense. Subaru had no time to try to comprehend those words. Why? Because for Subaru, everything passing through his hearing and his vision were terrifying. If breathing were terrifying, then blinking was terrifying. But not blinking was very painful and unbearable. Even that pain existed only to symbolize of terror Subaru. Feeling one pain means feeling the pain that he'd feel the next time. That would make Subaru feel a continuous, endless, infinite fear. So it wouldn't do to refuse to blink. But, if he blinked, the world would fall into darkness for an instant. In that dark moment where nothing could be seen, he wouldn't know what was happening. Although there might be nothing at all happening, he had no way of knowing for certain. Being unable to confirm anything was terrifying. If the unknown instinctively aroused fear, then to live was but an endless attempt to overcome the fear. In the end, the so-called fear had always been the feeling of weakness that began to plague a creature when it felt a threat to its life. Being able to have this emotion was synonymous with being a life form. The function of this horror was similar to pain. After all, creatures who left their instincts of danger behind could not survive. To numb your fear was to condemn yourself.

Sirius: "Oh my? You two look to be losing your minds. Loving and emotionally enriching people can sometimes be very fragile. Ah, that's because Love is just painful. However, it is precisely because love exists that we can survive. This is really very difficult. Then, I'll get Tina-chan to help me. Lusbel-kun has worked hard."

Being numb to the value of life meant violating an inherent survival ability. In other words, fear was necessary. Therefore, there was absolutely nothing to be ashamed about even praising the performance of feeling so frightened, like right now now. Of course, that kind of thing was just an assumption without any meaning. But, conducting such thought experiments was the best method to resist an overwhelming, dominating fear in the hope of finding a victorious breakthrough, wasn't it? Subaru certainly thought so. Lusbel, in front of him, began to convulse as his eyes rolled back in his head. The candlelight of that young boy's life was about to be extinguished.

That was sad and regrettable. However, Subaru couldn't be discouraged. He

would struggle and fight to the end, wasn't that what he had so vowed? Even in that terrible, toilsome, damaging trial last year. If not, why exactly did Subaru find it so sad and painful to survive, even so? Scary.

Very very scary. Terrifying. Everything was terrifying. Alive. Terrifying. Blinking. Terrifying. Breathing. Terrifying. Rancid. Terrifying. Disgusting. Terrifying. Scary. Scary. Scary. Scary. Scaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscaryscary—

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Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn't we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don't you think so?”

The world immediately flipped upside down in the blink of an eye, and Subaru collapsed as soon as he heard the fresh sound. A girl's awkward face caught his fall as he collided fiercely with her forehead.

Liliana: “Gah!?”

Subaru: “Huh?”

A sharp voice cried out.

Subaru stumbled several steps backward from the sudden, piercing pain. Somewhere in front of him, a sound of something falling into grass was made. Subaru did not respond immediately as he was too busy rubbing his forehead.

Subaru: “W-What just...?”

Emilia: “What’s wrong, Subaru? You suddenly headbutted Liliana. That’s no good. If you don’t like, you should resolve your differences by talking it out.”

Beatrice: “That’s right, in fact. Before resorting to violence, we should give that uncouth looking girl ample warning that we want to send her flying, I suppose.”

Liliana: “Am I really so ugly!?”

Liliana leapt to her feet with an unexpected cry.

Upon hearing her words, Emilia and Beatrice exchanged glances without speaking. Liliana suffered another blow and collapsed again.

Priscilla: “What a ridiculous farce. Commoners are not allowed to treat mine songbird in such a manner. This will never happen again.”

Refusing to stand for the violence being imposed on Liliana, Priscilla issued a complaint about Subaru’s behavior.

Subaru gave her a perfunctory nod, confirmed his location, once again, and, Subaru: “...disgusting.”

A second reset hadn’t changed his evaluation of that freak at all.

Chapter 21: Optimal Solution

— Subaru's second Return by Death hit him with an unprecedented sense of fatigue. Falling under the spell of that madness twice had placed tremendous mental burden on him.

Especially the second one. That overwhelming fear had been imprinted deeply into him, and he had been fully aware of himself in that moment of death.

The shivering that came from deep within his being, the fear that would never cease, the individual named Natsuki Subaru breaking, his fragile spirit crumbling into powder.

This death was probably due to a mad, fear-induced heart attack. Sirius had been delighted to see the terrified Subaru, who had been reduced to a machine whose purpose was to excrete fluid.

He had wanted to rescue Lusbel and challenge her, and that futile attempt had come at an incredibly heavy price.

However, although Subaru had died twice in as little as thirty minutes, and had yet to produce material results, his time hadn't been completely wasted.

Sirius, perhaps wanting to give Subaru some small comfort before his death, had, in her sincere and respectful manner, explained exactly what had been happening to him and Lusbel.

That was,

Subaru: “Our fear, compounding as we felt each other’s feelings... could that be the same principle as resonance?”

Subaru felt Lusbel’s fear, and Lusbel had felt that augmented fear from Subaru, which then transferred to Subaru. The never-ending cycle of fear overrode any previous state of fear and eventually grew so extreme that it became fatal.

This death had doubtlessly come about because of that. The first death, and now the second death.

The developments to date, the statements from Sirius, and status as Wrath. Those clues led Subaru to a conclusion.

A scene that should have made people feel disgusted or angry had instead drawn smiles and laughs from them.

Fear that had belonged to Subaru being transferred to a child, frightening him even further, before returning twofold to Subaru.

— Wrath, Sirius, could viciously manipulate the feelings of others for her own enjoyment.

That was most likely a special form of magic not belonging naturally to this world, just like Petelgeuse’s Unseen Hand. It was an ability belonging to the Witch Cult.

The ability, closely related to emotions, was quite fitting for Wrath. This was also known as a Sin Archbishop’s Authority.

However, although Subaru had finally pieced this together after his two deaths, this was the only intelligence he had.

Now, the question was the enabling condition of this power — in other words, the method that was used to open a connection.

Once the trick behind Petelgeuse’s Sloth was known, he became fairly easy to

defeat. Subaru had been able to see the Unseen Hand and resist Petelgeuse's bodysnatch.

Although he could resist it, he didn't understand why. Although he now had his Invisible Providence, Subaru was still confused as to why he could use a form of the [Unseen Hand].

In fact, pondering the presence of the Witch's scent surrounding his Return by Death and his immunity to the memory manipulation from the White Whale's fog, Subaru had optimistically considered that perhaps the Witch's Cult's authorities didn't affect him. His recent murders at the hands of Wrath seemed to disprove that theory.

Given his two encounters with Wrath, in the worst case, the triggering condition may even be

Contact with Sirius.

As soon as he'd heard her speak, as soon as he'd seen her figure, Subaru had probably fallen under her spell. Taking that into consideration, finding a way to deal with her would be difficult indeed.

The most straightforward and reliable solution would also be the most extreme; the tower could be destroyed from a distance with magic.

No contact would be made with Sirius, and he wouldn't need to lay eyes on her. Knowing where she'd appear, he could take the opportunity to launch a preemptive strike, and he'd be able to ensure that he wouldn't have to trigger Return by Death again.

Only, he would need to disregard the sacrifice of a courageous child, and so Subaru could never seriously consider such an option.

Sacrifices were necessary, who would be self-righteous enough to say such a thing?

To decide to on a utilitarian greater good at the price of other lives, from the perspective of those who were sacrificed, meant that the entire world would be lost. Subaru could not tolerate the loss of his own life, so how could he arrogantly place a price tag on the lives of others?

His goals were as he'd just determined. He needed to rescue Lusbel, and to prevent any unnecessary sacrifice. What troubled Subaru was achieving both at the same time.

Subaru: "Then, to rescue Lusbel... the only viable way is defeating Sirius."

The same situation as last time would inevitably develop if he tried to rescue Lusbel by himself. No matter how he struggled, trying to fight Sirius alone was tantamount to suicide.

Sirius's combat skills were evidently nothing to scoff at. Although she'd been wielding a chain, even deflecting Subaru's surprise attack was impressive.

Even considering that Subaru was an amateur at combat, the strike of a whip was too speedy to be followed by the untrained eye. To have been able to react so quickly to a surprise attack, and to deflect it with her chains, how skilled must she be?

Subaru couldn't even begin to imagine.

In other words, what Subaru needed was someone who could match Sirius in combat, who trusted Subaru enough to help him, and who could resist the power of Sirius's Wrath.

Subaru: "What kind of a miracle would it be if I just found a guy who coincidentally satisfied all those requirements...?"

Subaru sighed to himself as he considered this opportunistic line of thought.

However, the notion that there would be someone who could remain unaffected by Sirius’s power was not a baseless one.

The presence of someone like Subaru, who could see through Sloth’s power, being immune to Sirius’s Wrath was not so inconceivable.

After all, Subaru’s accreditation as Petelgeuse’s killer only came from his unique resistance to Petelgeuse’s power.

Since everyone in the square had been taken in by Sirius’s speech, he could assume that no one there had any such resistance to Sirius’s authority.

At the square, four people, including Subaru, had been prepared to fight Sirius, but she had taken special care to point them all out. And then, Subaru finally realized it.

Larkins had been at the square. Subaru: “Reinhard!”

Although Subaru, extreme opportunist that he was, tried to resist engaging in commonplace thinking, he finally remembered the man whose presence was the very peak of opportunism.

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Although Subaru wasn’t attempting to justify his delayed reaction, the reason it had taken so much time to connect Larkins with Reinhard was arguably the short interval between his Deaths.

A Death followed by a Death, madness followed by madness, all happening in the span of a mere fifteen minutes.

In that state, being able to calmly identify the crisis and calmly explore countermeasures before choosing the best solution was nigh impossible. If anyone tried to belittle him, Subaru would have liked to respond with a sharp complaint about Return by Death.

Subaru didn't want to trigger a Return by Death.

If circumstances would permit, he'd rather share a tranquil, peaceful life with Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice.

However, this world would never permit Subaru such a happy life. He was destined to live through his every day while struggling desperately.

So at this moment, Subaru was desperately making an argument.

Subaru: "I finally found you, I'm not letting you go so easily! Please, call me Reinhard right now! This is an emergency!"

Larkins: "So annoying! Why should I take the risk of being lectured by that red haired bastard? You must be kidding!"

A lively crowd had gathered around the two, who were angrily roaring at each other.

The crowd seemed to relish the tense atmosphere, eagerly expecting a fight to break out at any given moment.

Upon resurrection, Subaru, after arriving at an epiphany, began to act immediately.

Like last time, he left Beatrice as Emilia's guard, and used his errand as an excuse to leave the park. After arriving at the square, he'd searched desperately for Larkins. Now, he had finally entered the negotiation stage.

His search for Larkins had really been quite time-consuming, so upon seeing

him, Subaru had roughly grabbed his shoulder, which had led to their current quarrel.

Larkins had only further agitated Subaru by shouldering him in retaliation.

In any case, an argument was now inevitable. Subaru spoke rapidly and anxiously under Larkins's harsh glare.

Subaru: "Can you listen? Calm down and listen to me. I'm not playing around. If you don't want to die, hurry up and call Reinhard for me right now."

Larkins: "Huh? You devilish brat, are you looking down on me? You think you could actually kill me? Forget that bastard Reinhard, see if I don't kill you right here."

Subaru: "Ah, that isn't what I meant...!"

Larkins regarded Subaru's words as a provocation, and his anger started growing out of control.

After all, Subaru and Larkins had never been on good terms. In addition, it seemed that Larkins had a poor impression of Reinhard, who should have been his comrade. Someone he was already reluctant to call was requested by someone who he disliked and so he stubbornly refused Subaru's request.

Subaru: "You stubborn, inconsiderate idiot...!"

Subaru gritted his teeth toward Larkins and grabbed his head in his hands.

Needless to say, Subaru, who had failed to speak clearly and calmly, was also to blame. However, seeing his negotiations being refused to such an extent, he couldn't help wanting to make a complaint.

Although, to Larkins, Subaru must have looked to be a raving madman. Subaru's hands were tied due to his inability to reveal any of his foreknowledge.

— However, the situation being what it was, Subaru had no other way.

Subaru placed a hand on his chest, attempting to suppress his fear.

Subaru: "Larkins. This is not a joke. The reason why I want you to call Reinhard is because there's a strong enemy who I can't handle."

Larkins: "Someone who you can't handle? Don't think so highly of yourself."
Larkins snorted derisively.

Seeing that expression, Subaru lowered his gaze, took a deep breath, and opened his mouth.

Don't come, don't come, Subaru spoke while making such a wish. Subaru: "— The Witch Cult will show up here."

Larkins: "— !"

Subaru opened his eyes as, at his disturbing words, Larkins's face froze.

Finished, Subaru immediately looked down to his chest, but the expected pain did not come. That is, the punishment for disclosing information that could potentially reveal his Return by Death.

First of all, he was decidedly relieved about this.

Although Subaru hadn't triggered Return by Death for a year now, the penalties associated with it had remained.

In particular, when he'd attempted to spill everything to Beatrice, Subaru had been wracked by the pain he'd come to associate with the witch.

It was as if that black-handed witch had forgotten his commendable farewell gift to her at the tea party in Sanctuary. How rude.

So, Beatrice was no different from the others, and Subaru was unable to discuss anything of his questions or concerns with her.

Needless to say, that had killed his hope that he could share his knowledge with his partner, Beatrice, without having to face punishment.

But that was a long story that he didn't have time to consider right now.

At any rate, what was important now was that Subaru had successfully told Larkins his legitimate reason for needing Reinhard, without being punished by those black hands.

In fact, hearing the name "Witch Cult", Larkins seemed to reconsider his stance, dropping his gaze and narrowing his eyes in contemplation.

Larkins: "Hey, brat."

Subaru: "It's Natsuki Subaru. Stop always calling me a brat, Larkins."

Larkins: "That's Larkins-san to you. Bastard Subaru. How much credibility does that statement have? Using the Witch Cult as a bluff isn't something to do lightly, you know."

Larkins spoke with a low voice, casting a hostile gaze at Subaru.

In this world, the name of the Witch of Envy and the Witch Cult were incredibly weighty no matter where they appeared. This stemmed from the idea of the Witch being the embodiment of Absolutely Evil being deeply rooted in the world's history.

Even Larkins wore a serious expression that he would normally never reveal. He was finally taking this seriously, so now Subaru could only respond equally carefully to him.

Subaru: "I'm not kidding around or lying. The Witch Cult will come here. Many people will be in danger."

Larkins: "Where did you hear this... Ah, damn it. That's right. Your faction did away with the Witch Cult's Sloth. Damn, so there's actually credibility behind what you're saying..."

Before Subaru could come up with a response, Larkins found his own conclusion. Although that was in fact mere speculation, that merit seemed effective in having Larkins believe him.

Larkins: "Are they targeting the city? Or this specific square?" Subaru: "So you're going to believe me?"

Larkins: "You're the who said to stop messing around, right? Listen up, bastard Subaru. Although I don't want to be lectured by that bastard Reinhard, I also don't want to run into some trouble that could kill me. Since what happens next is entirely dependent on my mood, you'd better take care."

Although Larkins still held some measure of doubt, he wanted to hear the details. Surprised at this reasonable judgment, Subaru decided to continue with the conversation.

Subaru: "I understand, sorry. The Witch Cult's Wrath is planning to attack this square. She'll appear at that clock tower, and her target is everyone in the square, not any specific individual."

Larkins: "That's consistent with the Witch Cult's style. Damn it, how much time do we have?" Subaru: "There's probably only five minutes left. So, seriously, call him right now."

Larkins: "Five minutes!? You're kidding! Why didn't you say that sooner!?"
Subaru: "That's what I was trying to tell you five minutes ago!"

Although Larkins was outraged at the lack of time, Subaru had spent ten long minutes finding him and convincing him. If possible, Subaru hadn't wanted to walk this kind of tightrope.

Running around the city and calling for Reinhard would be more reliable than talking to Larkins. However, time didn't allow that of Subaru.

Subaru: "Anyway, please, could we stop messing around so you can call Reinhard? According to your conversation yesterday, it's through something like fireworks, right?"

Larkins: "Fireworks, what's that? ... I shoot magic in the air, and that bastard Reinhard can see it and recognize it as the signal."

Subaru: "...That's simple and clear, which is good, but what would happen if someone else suddenly fired magic into the air?"

Larkins: "There's no need to worry about that. Apparently the red haired bastard can tell who was responsible for which magic."

That was such an odd detail, and Subaru logged it in the back of his head. It seemed that, over the past year, Larkins had set a goal of learning to use basic magic.

Based on Subaru's initial encounter with him, it was hard to imagine that he was capable of using magic a year ago.

Larkins: "I'm not a performer, so move aside already, you annoying bunch!"

Larkins finally gave in to Subaru's persuasion, and prepared to call Reinhard.

The crowd, who had been whispering "are they starting yet?", "is it finally happening?" backed off, disappointed, as Larkins raised a hand, beginning to call a fireball.

Seeing the swirl of the red mana of the fire attribute, Goa, Subaru felt an odd sense of unsettling disconnect.

This time, the situation should have drastic changes.

Although it was a rather extreme case of persuasion, Subaru was still excited to learn that he could work with Larkins like this, even if the latter's actions were based on self-preservation.

This could be said to partially amount to Subaru's growth in the past year, and his defeat of Petelgeuse. Larkins, too, had changed in the year past.

Whether Subaru or Larkins, if neither of them had changed, then this collaboration could never have happened.

Therefore, this result was born of a simultaneously optimistic yet realistic positive growth. Reinhard would come here.

As a result, dealing with Wrath would also be easy. No matter how powerful the enemy was, they would be dwarfed by the Sword Saint. The power of Wrath surely wouldn't work on Reinhard. For some mysterious reason. Subaru just trusted Reinhard that much.

Larkins: "Goa!"

Larkins recited the incantation, and a red flame burst forth from his raised arm. The flame skyrocketed, and soon exploded with a dry sound in the blue

sky.

Call it fireworks or magic, it seemed a little shabby, but that signal was presumably more than good enough for the hero it was meant to reach.

Perhaps what happened next was due to that hazy relief.

Subaru, taking what had just happened for granted, allowed his guard to grow lax.

Had the thought of Reinhard's arrival caused him to relax so much that he neglect to pay attention to his surroundings?

Sirius: “— Oh my. There seems to be a fireball in the sky. What a beautiful, blinding light.” Of course the enemy would be aware of any commotion near the tower.

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Sirius, appearing on the tower, wore, as always, that bandage concealing her face.

However, the expression she wore was obviously a smile; something about the tone of her voice reflected a little bird chirping in the sunny spring.

Sirius raised a hand over her eyes and squinted at the light of the fireball.

She seemed to be regarding that red flame with the same admiration that most people would treat fireworks with.

Sirius: “This is great! Well, everyone, I'm sorry. Good morning!”

That unusually high-pitched sound snatched that crowd's attention from the fireball, and they turned to face Sirius.

Even Subaru did. So, he couldn't blame their collective reaction. Subaru: “No, don't look!!”

Seeing that fierce, bandaged smile out of the corner of his eye, he immediately issued a loud warning.

However, not a single person heeded his warning and looked away. Of course. Subaru himself had held the same feeling about Sirius since their first contact.

Even if he turned his face, his left cheek could still feel that intensity. There vicious wave of danger that existed to threaten him.

Faced with a bloody carnivore, how could anyone avert their gaze? Looking away from a dangerous pair of sharp fangs could only be done by those who had already given up on living.

Refusing to die, their human instincts directed their gazes upon Sirius.

Sirius: “Oh my. Silence came much faster than I expected. This must be thanks to the fact that the two of them attracted your attention before I appeared. Thank you. Please applaud those two young men.”

Sirius clapped her hands together as she spoke, the chains attached to them clattering on the floor, as she regarded Subaru and Larkins, who still held his arm outstretched.

Subaru, feeling a cool breeze on his face, clenched his teeth and attempted to refrain from reacting to Sirius's gaze.

Redirecting Larkins's attention would be impossible. He had already been entrapped by Sirius. No matter what Subaru did, he would be unable to get through to Larkins, and then Sirius would only entrap him as well.

In fact, now, Subaru couldn't bring himself to cover his ears.

He had expected that even awareness of Sirius would mean that her charm would become irresistible. Therefore, what Subaru had originally intended to do was immediately avert his gaze and cover his ears. Even if such measures would render him defenseless, he wouldn't be subjected to her mental manipulation.

However, that premeditated countermeasure was no longer available after his eyes had been captured.

And why would he cover his ears? Because he didn't want to hear Sirius's voice. However, why would he willingly deprive himself of such a pleasant sound?

Subaru: "——"

His attention placed on her, Subaru forgot himself and turned to look at Sirius.

Sirius watched Subaru as he did so, gleefully clasping her hands together and shaking her body from side to side. The chains again rubbed against the ground with metallic friction, issued clang, as if reflecting Subaru's heart crashing to the ground.

Sirius: "All right! It took 19 seconds for everyone to see me here. Sorry. But I

am very happy. And, although I don't know why, it seems to me that there's a child here who loves me far more than I expected. Well, then, I have to introduce myself."

As she spoke, Sirius lowered her head respectfully, facing a whirlpool of anxious gazes. Raising her head, basking in everyone's gaze,

Sirius: "I'm the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Wrath. I am called Sirius Romanee-Conti." She reported her daunting name.

That title should have been a symbol of disgust and terror, and should have evoked an incredibly negative response.

Instead, as she opened her speech, the crowd reacted as if she'd introduced herself as a friendly, close neighbor.

Sirius: "Oh, thank you. I'm sorry to take up everyone's time like this. However, please rest assured that I will put an end to all this soon."

???: "— Will you? Then it seems fortunate that I rushed here as soon as I could." Sirius: "—"

Sirius lowered her gaze once more, and Subaru and the rest of the crowd turned to the side.

They were all facing the waterway which ran behind the square. A smooth flow of water erupted alongside the wind of someone moving at incredible speed.

There, a red flame burned, and clear, sky-colored eyes blinked.

His fair, calm face was revered by all who gazed upon him.

A hero is what all humans had wished for, deep in their hearts, and the existence of that hero was now a reality.

Reinhard: "Searching for a shortcut took a little bit of time. Sorry for being late." The hero took not five minutes, but thirty seconds to arrive, and offered his apology.

Having sprinted through the roads — no, having traveled by waterway, the recently arrived Sword Saint swept his eyes quickly through the circle of people, before raising his eyes toward Wrath and sighing.

Reinhard: "I understand why I was called. That judgment was correct, Larkins. Or was it you, Subaru?"

Leaping from the water to the ground, and then into the square, Reinhard relieved the stiff Larkins, then patted Subaru's shoulders with his hands.

Recognizing the touch of those palms as real, Subaru gave several gasping exhalations as his whole body shuddered.

Subaru: "Rei, Reinhard?"

Reinhard: "Yes, it's me. From the looks of it, this is quite the emergency. Standing at the top of that tower... is a Sin Archbishop, right?"

Reinhard, offering a reassuring nod, stood in the spotlight.

Subaru saw his fair eyebrows wrinkle as he deliberately chose not to face Sirius. Reinhard seemed to also understand the danger.

Subaru: "She has a brainwashing ability. Although it feels a little better now... if I heard her voice or looked at her now, I'd immediately fall back under it."

Reinhard: "I know. And not just with sound and sight. It seems that even being in her presence will have that effect. If I'm near her for too long, I don't know if I could remain calm."

Subaru: "You're kidding, even you...!?"

Hearing Reinhard's vulnerable statement, Subaru fell into a speechless desperation.

Although he had no basis in believing so, he'd been convinced that as long as Reinhard were here, everything would be fine. However, Reinhard himself had told Subaru that he wouldn't be unaffected by Sirius.

In that case, even coming up with an idea of how to defeat that evil presence became exponentially more difficult.

Sirius: "I'm sorry if I'm mistaken, but could it be that you're the famed Sword Saint? If so...

what a wonderful day this will be!"

Reinhard: "As you said, I'm Reinhard van Astrea, the current inheritor of the title of Sword Saint. Unfortunately, I think that title is too heavy for me now."

Sirius: "Nonsense! But that's no problem! It's very nice to have you here. Because this country bears the greatest trust and highest expectations in you as a knight. Everyone loves you, and you love everyone. You are the embodiment of my hope, the ideal of my Love!"

Reinhard: "Am I?"

Sirius was indeed shaking her hands noisily and engaging in an ecstatic dance. Reinhard, although facing away from her, was chatting with her quite casually.

If communicating with her would lead to falling under her spell, then Reinhard's lack of action equated suicide.

Subaru spoke up anxiously.

Subaru: “Hey, hey, Reinhard... going on like this isn’t good. It’s not good at all. It’ll be really bad. Although I can’t say why.”

Reinhard: “...that looks to be the case indeed. And that doesn’t apply to just me. Taking the others into consideration, I shouldn’t drag this on for too long.”

Subaru should feel anxious, but gradually became unaware of why he didn’t. Reinhard sighed at his puzzlement, and took a step forward.

Then,

Subaru: “Reinhard?”

Reinhard: “I can’t hold on for too much longer. — So, I’ll get rid of the problem as soon as possible.”

As soon as those words faded, Reinhard tensed his legs slightly, and leapt forward.

That was the same movement he’d used to leave the waterway — but this time, it produced a rippling explosion, and everyone in the area gasped as they felt the impact of waves spread over the ground.

Leaving behind that share of amazement, Reinhard turned that energy into momentum. Sirius: “Hahahaha! Ah, how impressive this is —”

The Sword Saint kicked off from the ground, and, effortlessly, struck Sirius out of the tower, far into the sky above.

Chapter 22: A Casual Response

Could this be called aerial warfare?

Reinhard had leapt toward Sirius, knocking his opponent from the tower and sending her flying through the sky.

Sirius: “Hahaha! Ah, how impressive you are!”

As the heroic figure flew toward her, she raised her voice, ecstatic, and waved her arms about. Accompanying that motion was the piercing whine of her chain unravelling from her wrist.

That fully extended chain could now be used as a whip, although its merit as a weapon was based more in intimidating appearance and violent sound than convenience. Someone who chose to wield such a weapon was clearly out of touch with common sense.

That iron snake had undoubtedly tasted the blood of more than just a few people, and, at this moment, was partaking in a routine hunt, attempting to crush its prey with its iron jaws, the whistling wind it created resembling applause.

But even that blunt snake, who could approach the speed of sound, was clueless.

— In this world, there existed a human existence that exists in the same sense as that of Sirius that departed from its usual course.

Reinhard: “A chain, how troublesome.”

Hearing the sound of the chain entering the fight, the Sword Saint frowned and gave a troubled mutter.

In the midst of such an intense battle, he seemed to be giving the slight grievance that better suited the atmosphere of a brief break between classes.

Sirius: “Hahaha!”

Sirius, on the verge of panting, revealed her passionate smile to the spectators.

Surely, that was inevitable. However, the reasoning behind Sirius’s delight was mysterious. Whether it was because of desperation, or whether she was genuinely happy, one face was clear to all the spectators.

This was a situation that only Sirius would have laughed in. Reinhard: “——”

Sirius flew upwards, and Reinhard pursued her from below.

With Reinhard as her target, Sirius delivered a quick, precise blow. Even facing that oncoming chain, Reinhard didn’t reach for the sword hanging at his waist.

If his words from long before were true, it wasn’t that he didn’t intent to draw his sword, it was that he couldn’t. Reinhard’s legendary sword would only allow itself to face worthy opponents.

In that case, he was condemned to be unarmed while fighting that horrible freak. Even Reinhard, who Subaru had the utmost trust in, would have to undergo a bitter struggle — perhaps he would even fail to live up to Subaru’s expectation, in a show of human weakness.

If so, then that trust would soon be broken.

Aiming her second strike at Reinhard's, a high-pitched voice spoke up.

Shock waves and sparks danced at the scene. To Subaru and the other spectators, lightning seemed to flash through the sky.

The ability to accomplish that kind of witchcraft was precisely the proof that Reinhard transcended the boundaries of human skill.

Reinhard met the chain head on, lifting a slender leg to defend against it.

That attack was so surprising that it would have elicited a laugh. After that impact, Reinhard turned attention to wrapping his foot with the chain, moving it to suit his own will.

The movement itself was nothing too special. Reinhard had met the approaching chain with his right leg, and wound it around his foot in a makeshift weapon, using it to open an immediate follow up.

In only a moment, he'd easily alternated between offensive and defensive.

Needless to say, not everyone could keep up with the fight. Only the handful of people with combat training could follow those rapid, continuous attacks.

In that moment of understanding, there was an impulse to laugh. Subaru gave a long sigh and relaxed his shoulders. Fortunately, Reinhard was a comrade, so those thoughts were unnecessary. If he were the enemy, then Subaru's shoulders, knees, and bladder would have all given out.

Sirius: "Haha, hahaha! AHAHA, HAHAHAHA!!"

Sirius laughed loudly, her right arm spinning wildly like a tornado.

Since her left arm had been captured by Reinhard, she could only resort to using the right one. However, although the whistling snake tore through the sky, flying from every direction, it was blocked by the chain on Reinhard's right foot, creating a high-pitched whine and a shower of sparks.

Every spark dancing in the blue sky, was accompanied by a metallic instrument whose sound permeated the square, in a whirling performance of red and yellow.

A strike, another blow, but during that period, Reinhard had further closed the distance between himself and Sirius. Soon, after exchanging an array of blows, he'd reached her.

Sirius: "How unexpected! You've actually reached this point! Amazing!"

Reinhard: "You're very adept. I find it a shame that you've committed yourself to evil." In those moments, the two exchanged words the way they did attacks.

Reinhard quickly pulls back his right leg and thrusts his left hand with aligned fingers. Sirius greeted it with a powerful swing of her arm, the undulating chain diving at Reinhard with exposed fangs.

Although that chain was made of steel, Reinhard had used his own hand as a blade and cleaved it in two.

In the past, Subaru had witnessed the perfect splitting of disposable wooden chopsticks — a party trick. If Reinhard were to partake in those performances, he could split a steel blade like paper. He was the very portrait of beautiful swordplay.

The severed portion of the chain was propelled by the attack's momentum

into the clocktower, the violent collision shattering one of the building's walls. The sight of smoke and the rubble crashing into the square shook Subaru out of his trance.

He'd been completely fascinated.

Reinhard and Sirius's fight, no, Reinhard's fight, had entranced him. Whether envy or fear caused fascination was another matter entirely.

Subaru: "Leaving her to Reinhard is fine. Then, I...!"

He couldn't continue to dawdle here, blindly ogling the fight and waiting for an outcome.

Subaru squeezed through a gap in the crowd, running to the opening of the tower. Lusbel, who had been scheduled to be part of Sirius's speech, had probably been abandoned in the clock tower when he responded to Reinhard's inability to withdraw.

Saving him would ease Subaru's worries.

Just in case, so that if Sirius got away from Reinhard, Lusbel's safety would be guaranteed. Subaru climbed anxiously up the spiral staircase, again tasting that dark, damp air.

The tower was much brighter than it had been fifteen minutes ago, thanks to the light flooding in from the walls that had been broken by Sirius's chain.

After safely ascending the spiral staircase, Subaru found the bound Lusbel on the top floor. He'd been left face down on the ground, where his tears had pooled into a puddle. The child's sobs touched Subaru deeply.

Subaru: "Lusbel! You're safe now, don't worry!" Subaru tenderly took the chained Lusbel into his arms.

He ignored the warm torrent of tears as he returned Lusbel's desperate, terrified gaze with his own reassuring one.

Lusbel: "Mmm!"

Subaru: "It's alright, I'm on your side. And as for that monster, a reliable hero is fighting her right now. So, let's take this time to get you out of here."

Lusbel: "Mmm."

Subaru spoke with the utmost sincerity. Gradually, the struggling Lusbel's body lost its strength, and he faced Subaru with a tearful but clear expression.

After Subaru nodded in response to that inquiring gaze, Lusbel began sobbing anew, for a different reason than before.

Subaru: "Wait a second. Let me get this off of you."

After gently touching crying boy's head, Subaru started cautiously working on the chain.

From the shoulders to ankles, the chain was wound tightly, and he was also gagged with it. Subaru took care to avoid hurting the child as he unraveled it.

Subaru: "Well, I got it off. Can you stand up? If not, I can carry you."

Lusbel: "D-Don't worry, it's... thank you... hk."

Lusbel rose unsteadily to his feet, shaking his stiff legs, offering his gratitude.

Although his face was stained with tears, he was still a strong child. Subaru patted his head again.

Then, as he pondered the intense battle taking place near the tower,

Subaru: “Staying here might actually be safer, but we should probably get out just in case. Can you walk? Are you hurt anywhere?”

Lusbel: “My right hand, just a little bit...”

Lusbel frowned and obediently presented his wound to Subaru.

On his outstretched right hand was a sharp laceration that had clearly been made by a snake-like weapon. Seeing the blood oozing from the wound, Subaru contorted his face in discomfort.

Subaru: “Bastard, tying up such a small child, and even doing this to him.”

Lusbel: “No, no. This just suddenly... suddenly hurting when I was tied up.”

Subaru: “Suddenly?”

While he had been tied up, Subaru registered distractedly.

At least, Subaru shouldn't have hurt him in the process of unraveling the chain. His movements had been cautious, and if Lusbel had suffered so serious an injury, Subaru would have noticed.

— A terrible, ominous apprehension rose in Subaru's heart. Subaru: “...at any rate, we can't stay here. Let's go.”

Subaru took Lusbel's uninjured left hand and led him to the bottom of the spiral staircase, to the exit of the tower.

When Subaru returned to the square, he heard, Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

The mob had plunged into a frenzy, eagerly awaiting the execution of that captured freak, calling for vindication.

Eyes filled with bloodlust, mouths twisted in snarls, howling for murder.

Endless abhorrence of evil. Incredulous aversion to the unnatural. Wanting to be rid of the presence of an enemy who wasn't physiologically acceptable. This emotion was one of murderous intent.

And what was this called?

— This was known as Wrath.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

A crowd of complete strangers stood side by side as comrades, moving toward the same goal. Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

Their very hearts united in that moment, facing the spirits of good and evil. Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

Choosing to be united, pushing that limit, that was— Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

Sirius: “Joining feelings into one... this is surely Love, correct? Well, there is no doubt that this is a scene only Love could achieve, don't you agree?”

Rather than devising a scheme, Sirius murmured in her usual voice.

Sirius had been pressed to the side of the tower by the hero. The surrounding crowd eagerly cheered for the death of the unnatural person, and knowing that their Sword Saint had the power to kill the abomination.

The desperate Sirius seemed to have lost even the chain has on her left hand. If both hands were unarmed, she had no way to defend against Reinhard's knife-like hand.

This was clearly a dead end — however, Sirius wore her usual placid smile. Reinhard: “Are there any last words you want to say?”

Sirius: “Thank you. Then, allow me to offer you an piece advice. The other archbishops may not be as docile as me, so if you want to ask their last words, you might suffer for it.”

Reinhard: “— I will keep that in mind.”

In the face of Reinhard’s warm kindness, Sirius spoke a calm statement. Reinhard nodded in compliance and stepped forward, ready to execute her with the blade that was his hand.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

As the voice of the crowd grew in intensity, Sirius’s fate had been sealed. This was obvious, so why?

Standing at the entrance of the broken tower, Subaru felt a throbbing chill threatening to break his heart.

Why? What did that mean? He desperately wanted to speak, but his mouth couldn’t move. Once he began to speak, Subaru knew what he would say.

Subaru certainly would join the loud cries of “kill her!”

Sirius: “We know each other. Mutual humility. Mutual recognition. We forgive each other. That’s exactly the correct form that Love should take.”

Ignoring the subdued Subaru, Sirius continued to preach her rhetoric.

At first glance, she seemed to make sense, but, taking into account that Sirius was saying so, that proposition and the atmosphere itself turned unpleasant.

Reinhard: “——”

Reinhard seemed to have made the same judgment as Subaru.

There was no longer any meaning in letting Sirius speak, so Reinhard moved forward. However, just before Reinhard reached her, Sirius smiled and held her arms into the air.

Immediately, accompanied by a crackling sound, chains were ejected from the cuffs of her coat. Those chains were fired through her sleeves, and then wrapped around the tower as Sirius began to fly once more.

She intended to escape — but just before she could, Reinhard stomped on the ground. Shock waves spread upward, like an explosion.

His hand struck at her in a smooth, upward motion. In that moment, Sirius’s life would end.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!” And that result, will be prompted by the crowd's cry.

Subaru’s heart spiked with fear. Driven by a sudden impulse,

Subaru: “REINHARD!!”

He yelled the hero’s name, but, falling under the sway of the crowd, Subaru: “—KILL HER!!”

Reinhard slashed.

A clean line swept neatly from Sirius's left shoulder to her right flank.

That exquisite cut was so sharp that there was a delay of several seconds before Sirius's body could react. Finally, the blood in her body noticed the wound, and her body collapsed as blood began to spray.

Sirius: "... Ah, this gentle world."

Her internal organs spilling out, Sirius's body was cleft in half.

Her upper body continued soaring upward, pouring blood and intestines through the air, while her lower body, left in place, became a fountain, sprinkling blood through the square.

This was hell come to earth.

No one could bear to look straight at that horror. However, no one looked away. No one could look away.

Reinhard: "...it can't be."

After landing, Reinhard uttered a stunned mutter.

Subaru saw that his blue eyes were shaking with grief, a desperate shadow enveloping his fair, handsome face.

— And then Subaru could see no more.

Subaru: “——”

Subaru, and the rest of the crowd, lay scattered in the square that had turned into a pool of blood. From their left shoulders to their right sides, everyone had been clearly bisected.

Subaru: “——”

Blood and viscera spilling out, Subaru’s consciousness didn’t have time to understand what was happening before he was pulled into the embrace of death. Just before that happened, he felt something else.

A boy's left hand, holding on to his own, whose owner had also been cleaved enough, squeezed tightly, looking to Subaru for salvation.

He seemed to have felt that somewhere before.

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Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “——ghk!”

Beatrice: “Ow! Ow, that hurts! It hurts in fact, SUBARU!!” Blinking rapidly, Subaru was surprised by what he just heard.

The sudden switch in consciousness had him clinging to Beatrice’s hand with the same vice grip that he’d been making before his Return by Death.

Beatrice tearfully kicked Subaru’s leg after suffering from that sudden

atrocities, who recoiled in pain and loosened his grip on her hand.

Liliana: “W-W-W-Why did you do that? Why would you attack Beatrice-sama’s lovely hands so suddenly? You’re going to ruin them... but it’s okay, I... I-I’ll kiss them and make it better for you, ha... haha.”

Beatrice: “It’s alright, I suppose! That’s quite gross, in fact!”

Beatrice flushed with panic as Liliana grabbed her hand. She ducked behind Subaru. Even if he had injured her hand, her trust in her partner had not diminished.

Emilia: “Subaru, are you alright? Just now, you suddenly turned pale...”

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan...”

A concerned Emilia had joined his side, reaching a hand to his forehead. Subaru saw himself reflected in her amethyst eyes and breathed a sigh.

He’d come back.

He patted his shoulders and chest, which had been nearly bisected. His abdomen was cut, and his head had been smashed. Although Subaru was confident in his experience with deaths, this had been his first real beheading. Taking precedence over pain was a sense of astonishment and loss, the knowledge of his Death tugging at Subaru’s spirit. This was a death that Subaru, who was commonly subjected to them, could accept.

Subaru: “Why, can’t I find a simple conclusion...”

Once again catching up with the memories he’d inherited memory, this Death

taught him the reality of Sirius's power.

Although he hadn't registered much pain, the sense of loss and shock hit Subaru one after the other. His partial understanding of the phenomenon grew.

That is, this time, the cause of death —

Subaru: "Disgusting..."

Needless to say, he had long understood.

Subaru was beheaded and killed this time exactly the same way that Sirius was. In other words, to put it bluntly, Subaru went through the same deathmatch as Sirius. Looking back thirty minutes before the first reincarnation, Subaru only saw Lusbel's death in joy and then he died. The previously unknown cause of death had now been identified.

— Sirius could transfer Deaths if anyone died in her vicinity.

Not just brainwashing with emotional changes. Even changes that occurred in the body could be shared. It wasn't merely brainwashing, but bodywashing. Or could it be called soulwashing?

In other words, killing her meant killing all of the people in that square.
Subaru: "What to do?"

Defeating Sirius using brute force could be achieved by calling Reinhard.

Only, that would come at the price of the life of everyone in that square. In that case, the result would be no different from Sirius's intended atrocities.

Summoning Reinhard was nothing more than a concise and easy-to-understand solution at first glance, but it was, in actuality, the wrong answer. In this case, what could he do?

Subaru: “Call Reinhard, and tell him to take her alive...?”

That was unlikely, but perhaps not impossible.

Since Reinhard was capable of killing Sirius, he should also be capable of detaining her. The problem was that if she were caught alive, there would be no way to end her spiritual control.

Subaru had come in contact with Sirius and Lusbel, and had gone mad and died. If that insidious, insane infection were to be repeated, then capturing Sirius would be fruitless.

If she were killed, the everyone would be buried with her.

If she were caught, there was a possibility that she’d spread her contagion.

Just existing made her a threat to others, she was this kind of bomb-like existence. She truly deserved her title of Sin Archbishop.

Subaru: “What else?”

Unable to find a breakthrough, Subaru found himself in a dilemma.

If Reinhard were called, he would surely be able to kill or restrain Sirius. Was that okay, ignoring the possibility of falling into madness?

Subaru: “——”

Time was passing even as Subaru pondered.

Seeing the silent Subaru, those around him all appeared uneasy. Whether to keep them from worrying or to keep them in the dark, Subaru had to offset that impression.

He hurriedly changed the expression on his face and announced,

Subaru: “Ah, right. That is... yes, I suddenly felt like I’d puke up the grilled meat from this morning. My chest was a bit uncomfortable.”

Liliana: “Ah, I see, I see. I, too, often feel nauseous, which is accompanied by a lot of gas...”

Subaru: “Stop right there. No matter how you act, you’re still a girl.”

Subaru interrupted Liliana’s jokes with a smile and turned towards Emilia. Seeing that, Emilia lowered her gaze.

Emilia: “I’ll believe Subaru since he says so, but... this is a special case, okay?”

Subaru: “Mm, thanks... then, I’ll go buy desserts, as Liliana suggested. Emilia-tan, please continue to enjoy the song.”

Thanks to Emilia's kindness, Subaru was able to make an announcement after his wavering. Then, holding Beatrice’s hand again,”

Subaru: “Beako. Come shopping with me. Let’s take a walk and banter like we always do.” Beatrice: “What are you suddenly — Mm. I understand, in fact.”

Beatrice cast aside her usual attitude when she saw Subaru’s face. To put it more appropriately, she accepted his offer after noticing his pleading

expression.

Subaru took a confused Beatrice's hand and ran from the park for the fourth time.

This time, rather than leaving Beatrice behind, he'd bring his reliable partner with him. Even though he had yet to reach any kind of breakthrough.

Priscilla: "—Hmm."

— Staring at the retreating figures of Subaru and Beatrice, the red-clad woman watched the duo with a thoughtful expression.

Chapter 23: Disrupted situation

Beatrice: “So? Tell me what happened, in fact.”

Having left the park, Beatrice determined that they’d left Emilia’s line of sight, and slowed her steps. Although she’d slowed to talk, Subaru grabbed her arm and led her forward.

Beatrice: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “Sorry. We have to talk where no one else is around. There are many things that I want to discuss thoroughly, but we don’t have enough time. —In fact, we have less than 15 minutes.”

Beatrice: “... I understand, I suppose. Explain while we walk, in fact.”

Beatrice marched along obediently as Subaru turn his face away, trying to hide his anxiety.

The presence of his understanding partner lightened Subaru’s heart, and he carefully sorted through the thoughts swimming in his mind as he tried to relay them to Beatrice.

Subaru: “The witch cult will attack the square that we’re heading to, and we have to stop their wickedness.”

Beatrice: “Witch Cult... hk”

Beatrice’s breath caught, and she urged Subaru to continue.

What troubled him were the rules and penalties for giving out information learned through Return by Death. Even if he'd been able to safely relay tidbits to Larkins, there was no certainty that he could do so with Beatrice. That was the nature of the devil of shadows who bound him.

The handicap that prevented Return by Death from showing giving out information only judged the punishment after that had already happened.

If that weren't the case, Emilia's heart wouldn't have been crushed when she'd learned the secret. This was the only explanation he could think of.

So Subaru paid careful attention to what he told Beatrice.

Those devil's hands, when reaching for Subaru, were terrifying but not unbearable. However, if they reached Emilia or Beatrice, Subaru would be crippled by his guilt.

It could be forgiving to Subaru, but it was merciless to others. Beatrice: "As usual, you can't say anything, I suppose?"

Subaru: "...sorry. I'm so unreasonable."

Beatrice: "Fine, in fact. I'll believe it without any basis, I suppose. They're Subaru's words, so Betty will believe them, in fact."

Beatrice took the useless Subaru's hand with her own.

The warmth in the palm of her hand gave him the strength to speak his next words.

Sirius, Wrath, could connect senses and brainwash souls, and, taking into

account the difficulty of communication, Beatrice's perception of danger would be skewed.

Subaru: "First of all, the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult who will appear is Wrath, who is, uh... a pervert."

Beatrice: "If that's the information that needs to be conveyed then Betty thinks that Subaru is having bad thoughts, I suppose."

Subaru: "Anyway, there's something very important that we'll have to deal with. Her abilities... she can control emotions, or is it sharing senses between people?" Beatrice: "Controlling emotions and sharing senses?"

Beatrice lifted her head.

She was unable to concretely picture it. Of course, Subaru also could not clearly understand the effect of that power.

Subaru: "Explaining is a little difficult... if Wrath is overjoyed, then no matter how angry I am, I'll also feel happy."

Beatrice: "... I don't really understand how that's a threat, in fact."

Subaru: "Recognizing danger is impossible. No matter how dangerous the situation is, there's no fear. You'll accept it with delight and won't be able to correctly grasp the situation, understand?"

A crying, pleading child who didn't want to die had been cheered for by the masses.

They found joy in everything in front of this. This was comparable to delight at being stabbed with a knife, up until your life was ended by that blade.

Beatrice: “The sharing of emotions, I understand, I suppose. What about sharing senses, in fact?”

Subaru: “That’s not all. When someone else feels pain, I’ll feel it too. If the Sin Archbishop’s head is cut off then mine will come flying off as well... it’s overwhelming, isn’t it.”

As he explained further, his frustration at the hopeless situation began to surface again.

This explanation was rather straightforward; if she died, so would he. He’d been able to escape through Return by Death, but every who’d suffered before had no way of overriding that at all.

Subaru: “If she’s alive, then there’s a possibility you’ll go crazy just by being nearby. If she’s dead then we’ll all die too. She’s really the worst kind of enemy, troublesome alive or dead.”

On his second death, Subaru had been swallowed by fear and driven mad. The origin of that fear had been Lusbel, who desperately sought help.

On that occasion, he’d continually felt Lusbel’s madness as well. Their spirits had weakened, driving them into that state.

It was hard to say “I should have be better”. It was also hard to imagine that Lusbel, who he had spoken to earlier, would resist such overwhelming terror.

But something other than just fear should have killed Subaru during his second death.

Finding a strategy that could defeat Sirius would be difficult without the knowledge of what that something was.

“__”

Subaru didn't continue to speak, but he still kept a grip on Beatrice's hand.

Obviously, he'd taken Beatrice, but he still hadn't found a solution. As such, Beatrice would probably be entangled in a battle with no real hope of victory.

The easiest thing to do would be to have Reinhard take Sirius alive. Subaru considered just summoning Reinhard like last time and telling him to capture Sirius.

He'd simply tell Reinhard what to do before he engaged in battle.

Before the sudden attack on the square, he'd talk to Larkins again, and Reinhard would be called to deal with the crisis. Reinhard wouldn't attack directly without asking for details. Even explaining the need for an emergency call, there would be at least a few minutes until Sirius would make a move.

Subaru: "I'm an idiot. No, I'm a moron. If Reinhard's called then Sirius is going to react immediately. There won't be time to explain, just like last time."

Subaru needed to tell Reinhard before he started fighting Sirius.

Could he do it? Subaru had no confidence that he'd be able to express his thoughts in time. In the last loop, although he'd wanted to tell Reinhard to capture her, his mouth had disobeyed him and joined the crowd in yelling "kill her". This was an undeniable precedent.

Beatrice: "Subaru. There's still more bad news, in fact." Subaru: "...Seriously? I don't want to hear more bad news."

Beatrice: "I understand, I suppose. But, I have to tell you... Betty would be useless in a battlefield with Reinhard, in fact. I'd just be a cute little girl, I suppose."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Beatrice spoke suddenly, her eyes downcast.

Beatrice: “Because of his physiology, Reinhard acts as a beacon for mana. The surrounding mana in the atmosphere will follow him blindly, causing damage to the environment, which becomes a burden to him. Spirits and magic users will be unable to use mana, and I won’t be able to do anything.”

Subaru: “What... the... That there should be such a thing...”

Even as he said so, Subaru recalled the circumstances of his arrival.

On the first day Subaru had been summoned to this world, Reinhard and Elsa had fought a battle over Emilia’s Royal Election emblem.

Subaru recalled how Emilia had mentioned how magic became ineffective as Reinhard had revealed his true ability.

Beatrice: “If Reinhard can solve the problem, then it wouldn’t matter if Betty can’t do anything, in fact. But, if just Reinhard isn’t enough...”

Subaru: “Beako won’t have the option of being useful.” That fantasy was also killed.

Just his presence would cause magic to lose all function. Calling Reinhard would now be counterproductive.

— Awful, awful, awful, awful, awful, awful, what a disaster. Subaru could no longer see any light.

Was it right or wrong to call Reinhard? What about bringing Beatrice?

Ignoring Sirius and trying to save people in the square. In that case, Sirius would only find another place to do the same thing. There was no point.

As he contemplated, anxiety began to burn through Subaru's mind.

Subaru expended as much effort as he possibly could in search of a solution, but could find none. Even so, time was ticking on mercilessly.

Beatrice: "...Subaru, we're at the square, in fact." Subaru: "—hk"

Hearing her, Subaru suddenly looked up and saw the square.

The two had arrived at their destination, which would soon be marked by tragedy. No solution had been found yet. Their remaining time just vanished little by little. The white clocktower. The crowded square.

There were less than ten minutes before the tragedy would take place. How to solve it correctly. What to do?

Beatrice: "Subaru, I might have come up a solution, in fact."

As Subaru's face was taut with tension, Beatrice spoke up. Subaru's blanking mind was startled by her sweet voice.

Subaru: "Came up with a solution!?"

Beatrice: "I might be wrong, but Subaru's description of Wrath's abilities sounds familiar... I'm thinking of a higher level magic called Nect that has a similar effect."

Subaru: "Nect...!"

Nect — It was a form of magic that Subaru had experienced in the past. With Nect, magic users could share the awareness and feelings of others. Indeed, it

seemed similar to Sirius's authority.

While wondering why he hadn't noticed at first, Subaru thought out loud.
Subaru: "So is there any counter for Nect?"

Beatrice: "...usually, countering Nect is unnecessary, I suppose. It is intended to unite comrades and express feelings, in fact. Using Nect as a weapon seems strange, I suppose."

Beatrice gave her unhappy reply to the anxious Subaru.

Subaru had once reluctantly shared his vision with Julius using Nect, in order to defeat Petelgeuse by making his Unseen Hands visible.

Nect's ability was used for cooperation between allies.

It was absolutely not the kind of magic that should be used to take hostages.

Beatrice: "Normally, there is a condition for Nect that requires contact through mana circulation, in fact. The Archbishop's authority probably has the power to circumvent such a condition, I suppose."

Subaru: "So her authority can forcibly achieve it. More than that..."

Beatrice: "How to counter it, I suppose. — Shamak is the most obvious answer, in fact." Subaru: "Shamak-san has arrived! That's magnificent!"

Subaru perked up at Beatrice's proposal.

Shamak was an incredibly familiar magic. In painful, hard, dangerous times, in the hopeless of situations, Shamak had always faced adversaries alongside Subaru.

Prior to contracting Beatrice, Subaru's main sources of strength were Rem, Patrasche, and Shamak.

And even after the destruction of the his mana gate, through his contract with Beatrice, Shamak was still helping Subaru.

Subaru: "I see, Shamak, huh... If it's Shamak then surely everything is somehow..."

Beatrice: "Subaru seems to have an unusual level of trust for Shamak, I suppose. It's the most basic of Yin magic and it's really not that useful, I suppose."

Subaru: "Even Beako isn't allowed to badmouth Shamak like that...!"

Beatrice: "What's made Subaru defend Shamak to this extent, in fact?"

Beatrice listened to the incomprehensible ramblings with a sigh, then glanced around carefully while holding a finger up.

Beatrice: "Shamak is rooted in altering consciousness — it's a magic that forcibly breaks the mind's contact with surroundings, I suppose. Subaru uses it strangely, in fact, but Betty doesn't have any problem with it at all."

Subaru: "In other words...?"

Beatrice: "When that magic is cast on the crowd, everyone's minds will be blinded with Shamak, and the Sin Archbishop shouldn't be a problem, in fact. Though I'm worried about whether or not I can control it from affecting Subaru, I suppose."

Beatrice spoke with confidence and Subaru clenched his hands with excitement at this new glimmer of hope.

Subaru: "Alright, good. I'll be depending on your magic. Then... what's next?"
Beatrice: "Aside from Reinhard, who can defeat the Sin Archbishop, in fact?"
Subaru: "....."

If they called Reinhard then Beatrice wouldn't be able to use her Shamak strategy. Therefore, he needed to be excluded from their calculations.

However, on this occasion, Reinhard was perhaps the only one who could defeat Sirius.

Beatrice: "Speaking of which, since Betty needs to maintain Shamak, Betty won't be able to fight, in fact."

Subaru: "That's right. Then... we're back at square one."

Without Beatrice's backing, Subaru would almost certainly be unable to defeat Wrath. Without his trump card, just his whip alone wouldn't allow him to escape unscathed.

Subaru: "At that time, it seemed like there were other places to fight than the square... Subaru thought of the first time at the square."

Upon detecting a threatening presence in the tower, several people reacted immediately. A beastman, a blindfolded woman, a serious looking businessman, and Larkins.

Excluding Larkins, how would the remaining three fare? Adding Subaru to their number would total four, perhaps meaning that there was yet a way out.

Subaru: “What a stupid train of thought, asking strangers to trust me. I don’t think there’s anything I haven’t thought of now...”

???: “— In that case, should I play a part since I know of your strength?”

Subaru: “—— !?”

A sudden voice from behind pierced into his hopeless thoughts.

At that all too familiar voice, Subaru and Beatrice looked back in surprise. Standing behind the two with their hands on their hips,

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan? Why are you here...”

Emilia: “Subaru seemed to be acting strange, so I was worried that something bad was happening. It looks like I was excluded, that’s one of Subaru’s bad traits.”

Having been criticized, Subaru pressed his mouth shut.

Astonished at Emilia’s sudden appearance, he couldn’t respond. Beatrice took his place and looked up at Emilia.

Beatrice: “You should have stayed in the park, in fact. Why did you come, I suppose?” Emilia: “...I couldn’t just wait. Subaru told me to stay, but Priscilla told me otherwise.” Subaru: “That woman in red?”

Emilia: “She said that if I didn’t follow you, I’d certainly regret it. When I caught up and saw that nothing had happened, I thought about leaving quietly, but you two seemed to be discussing something serious.”

Emilia's decision was influenced and the source of that evil comes to mind.

Subaru gritted his teeth, mentally cursing Priscilla and her arrogant, disruptive meddling. That malicious whimsy had perfectly arranged the situation Subaru wanted to avoid the most. Subaru: “Emilia-tan, I’m happy. I’m glad, so, from now on...”

Emilia: “The Witch Cult will appear? I heard you... even if Subaru tells me to go back, I won’t. This concerns me, too.”

Subaru: “Emilia!”

There was little basis for his line of thought.

He spoke sharply, desperate to drive Emilia away. She couldn’t meet the Witch Cult.

Subaru couldn’t quite articulate a reason, but it wasn’t anything like stubborn protectiveness. He instinctively understood that she just couldn’t.

Emilia absolutely couldn’t meet the Witch Cult. To Emilia, that cult was a poison to be avoided. Although that held true for the majority of people born in this world, Emilia was a special case.

Subaru: “We’ll manage something. Emilia doesn’t need to be involved. This has nothing to do with you.”

Emilia: “Even so, what if Subaru is hurt because I’m not there? I’d never let that happen. If Subaru fights, I’ll fight by his side. If Subaru wants to protect something, I’ll do my best to help. And since Subaru will certainly protect me...”

Subaru: “——”

Emilia: “I also want to protect Subaru. I promised I wouldn’t cry like that anymore.” Emilia spoke with an unyielding heart.

In order to keep her away from danger, Subaru had to summon every drop of

his courage, face adversity with a heart of steel.

However, Subaru, right now, was afraid. He was terrified of fighting. Three times.

Three times Subaru had lost to Sirius, and three times he'd lost his life.

No matter how experienced he was with death, he'd still died so much, in such a short span of time.

Death was horrible, unacceptable, and no matter how much he experienced it, he couldn't grow used to it.

Having his life taken was completely unreasonable. That denied his self, trampled on his existence, insulted his soul. It was something that stole from him.

Although he tried to cover everything up, Subaru couldn't brush off everything that affected him.

Even while stubbornly maintaining that he had people he wanted to protect, he could never cast off the weak heart that was afraid to die.

Natsuki Subaru, no matter what, hadn't been able to overcome that weakness. Beatrice: "...Subaru. You should give up, in fact."

Subaru: "Beatrice..."

Beatrice: "Emilia is stubborn, I suppose. She won't change her mind, in fact. Betty also understands Emilia's feelings, I suppose. Betty wants to protect Subaru the same way... Betty isn't able to deny her that, in fact."

Beatrice is key to the strategy and also the decision-making party. If she waves a white flag, then Subaru won't be unable to resist.

Emilia looks to Subaru sincerely, and Beatrice adorably. Under their gaze, Subaru finally gave in. Subaru: "...the cultists will target you. If that happens, think of yourself as a priority."

Emilia: "Mm, I understand. Even if I'm caught, Subaru will definitely save me. I believe in you and I'll do my best."

Subaru: "Don't jinx it... so, how much of our conversation did you hear?"
Having been accepted by Subaru, Emilia gave a relaxed smile.

She touched her fingers to her lips.

Emilia: "I heard the gist of it. The Witch Cult is going to wreak havoc with Nect, which

Beatrice wants to counteract with Shamak. During that, I have to work hard to scold that villain." Subaru: "That's a childlike way of understanding it, but it works. Emilia, can I depend on you?" Emilia: "Leave it to me. I'm plenty strong."

Emilia makes a guts pose with her hands. That lovely action showed a certain lack of tension, but she seemed to have understood. Subaru felt restless and useless about relying on Emilia.

Moreover, the timing of Beatrice's magic was difficult for him to get a grasp on, which made it another element of anxiety. But,

Subaru: "Emilia-tan and Beako are both here, so I can't fail...!" Instead of feeling anxious, he used that to fuel his determination. Subaru: "Besides, it's almost time."

Between Beatrice's proposal, and Emilia's joining, more than half of their remaining time had gone by. They'd try their best when it came to Sirius.

If they could, avoiding Lusbel's location and knocking the tower down would be preferable.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan. Soon a strange person will appear on the tower. Attack

then with a big shot. Having her fall from the tower would be ideal. Afterward, Beako will prepare her spell, so when the signal comes we'll start fighting."

Emilia: "Mm, I understand. Although I do not know if things will go that smoothly, but I'll try." Emilia's expression stiffens and both Subaru and Beatrice nod at each other. The plan is set.

Subaru: "—She's here!"

A figure could be seen moving about in the clock tower's window.

A body wrapped in a black coat, a head wrapped in bandages. The ends of her chain, hanging from her hands, struck the ground with rattling sounds as she looked down at the square.

The people there had yet to notice that anomalous presence.

Sirius stood on her stage, shaking her body and opening her arms as though admiring the people who were unprepared for the imminent threat.

And then she began to clap — the people who heard the sound noticed her, and her speech began.

Subaru: "——"

Swallowing, Subaru witnessed the moment.

With imposing gestures, Sirius raised her chest to speak fiercely— Emilia: "UI Huma!"

A huge icicle appeared in front of the tower, hanging in the air near Sirius.

The thick icicle, which was around the size of five people, struck the tower with a violent crash. An icicle speared through the front of the tower, and the walls split apart. Subaru's jaw dropped in amazement.

Subaru: "E-Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "Subaru said we needed to strike first, so I did... did I mess up?"

Subaru: "No, GJ. I just didn't expect you to attack before her introduction."

Subaru hadn't motioned for her to act yet, and was surprised that Emilia had spotted the threat at a glance.

Since Sirius had been equally unprepared. Maybe the blow had even taken her out. Moreover, the panicked crowd were all fine, so perhaps Sirius had indeed been incapacitated.

That was entirely from Emilia's great contribution. Subaru: "Beako, what do you think?"

Beatrice: "First of all, think of a way to address the misunderstanding people around us, in fact."

As Beatrice's surprise turned to pride, Subaru wanted to ask whether or not they'd gotten Sirius.

Emilia surveyed the destruction of the tower while Subaru slowly turned to face the uneasy crowd. The beastman and the blindfolded woman were there — how unfortunate, they were people that Subaru had wanted to ally with.

Subaru: "Uh, well, what do I do now? Explain that we didn't mean any harm?"

Emilia: "—Mm. You better do that, Subaru."

While Subaru scratched his head, pondering the explanation, Emilia suddenly grabbed his shoulders, placing herself in front of the crowd.

In that moment, a crack sounded through the air, and a blue sword of ice appeared in Emilia's hands. She assumed a battle ready posture, facing down the crowd.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan? You don't have to go that far..."

Emilia: "It's not that. Look closely, Subaru. There's no sign of sanity." Subaru: "—Eh?"

Scared by Emilia's suddenly firm voice, Subaru surveyed the crowd around them, and couldn't help but exclaim. Like Emilia had said, their eyes held no trace of cognizance.

The people around them were red from neck up, the blood vessels in their faces on the verge of bursting, bloodshot eyes glaring at Subaru's group.

Their gazes were filled with only fury. Subaru: "Beako! What about Shamak!?" Beatrice: "... It failed, I suppose."

Subaru: "What?"

Beatrice: "This magic is nothing like Nect... no, it's evil, in fact. This is nothing like magic, I suppose. A curse... it is magic, in fact!"

Beatrice raised her voice in anger, and Subaru could only answer with a frown.

He wasn't sure of the specifics, but Beatrice's Shamak hadn't worked. He understood the issue but had no solution.

such a similar stench, how shameless, the stench of rotting insects, ah, ah, ah ah aaAAAAAAH! How hateful! How rancid! How vile!”

The anomalous woman clutched her bleeding head with a harsh cry. Spittle flew from her mouth as she ruthlessly stomped her feet. Subaru knew this odd behavior. It was wild as ever, but it’s direction was obviously different.

Sirius: “Me! Are you testing my love for her husband, half-elf?! Were you not satisfied with taking my husband from me, YOU HALF HALF-WITCH BITCH!!?”

Gritting her teeth, she issued a wrathful cry as she leapt forward.

Sirius, who’d fallen from the tower, folded her arms in front of her face, and red flames flared into life. They sprayed from both arms, and a line of flame had formed as she landed in the square.

Exercising her limbs, armed with her flame, the madwoman raised her head.

Emilia held her sword of ice ready as she stood in front of Subaru and Beatrice, guarding them. Swinging her gaze back and forth, Sirius yelled with a furious voice.

Sirius: “Me! I AM THE WITCH CULT’S SIN ARCHBISHOP OF WRATH!!”

Red flames gushing forth, she bathed the crowd in heat as she raised her arms.

In a frenzied crisis completely different from the situation Subaru had expected, the madwoman introduced herself.

Sirius: “— SIRIUS ROMANEE CONTI!! DAMN HALF-ELF AND SPIRIT, I’LL SCORCH YOUR CORPSES AND SCATTER YOUR ASHES AT MY HUSBAND’S TOMB!!”

Chapter 24: Resolution of Ice and Fire

Sirius hadn't registered Subaru's presence.

She merely glared with passionate hatred at the two standing in front of Subaru — that is, Emilia and Beatrice.

Subaru: "What's up with her? She's not the same as before..."

Subaru could not hide his wavering confusion at Sirius's rage.

In the short span of time since he'd encountered her, Subaru had met a relatively normal Sirius three times. Among those encounters, although Sirius hadn't followed any expectations common sense would bring, she was not someone irrational who was overrun by rage.

In fact, she had always been attempting to justify her claims to force on others.

So, the Sirius in front of them was completely foreign.

She'd lost her rationality and fallen prey to rage. Putting it simply, she now seemed a perfect fit for her title of WRATH.

Sirius: "I could keep burning and burning you, but it wouldn't be enough... like maggots, like flies. Haha, how much do you hate me!? Even in my saddest days,

am I not allowed the freedom of mourning?”

Emilia: “... I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

Sirius: “Ah, ha!?”

Emilia responded fearlessly to Sirius’s enraged allegations, even at Sirius’s fierce reactions.

She pointed the tip of her sword of ice at the crowd behind Sirius.

Emilia: “If you feel angry at me, I’ll hear you out. After all, the sudden provocation came from us, so of course you’d be angry. However, this has nothing to do with the other people here. Please liberate them.”

Sirius: “That’s the wrong attitude! If you want to let everyone go, do it right! Of course I’ll be angry? Then show me the right attitude! Apologize, repent, cry and beg for forgiveness, then let me shoot flames into your ass and scorch your internal organs away!”

Emilia: “Having my organs burned would be troublesome. —So, let’s settle this simply.” Sirius tilted her head upon hearing Emilia’s low voice.

Emilia immediately twisted her upper body slightly and darted forward. Her pale wrists wielded her sword of ice as if it were weightless.

The sun glistened off of the sharpened tip of the sword as she drove it toward

Sirius's shoulder.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan?"

Sirius: "Gah!"

Subaru's exclamation overlapped with Sirius's snarl.

Facing that swinging, Sirius immediately lifted her left wrist, bringing flames to the swords. However,

Sirius: "Damn half-witch!"

Emilia: "Please don't say that anymore. It'll make people feel dirty."

Emilia's sword, although bathed in Sirius's flame, didn't vaporize into air.

The silver tip of the sword won against the heat, and met Sirius's burning left wrist — only, Sirius's chain was also wrapped around it.

With a sharp ring, the sword and chain collided with a brilliant flash of mana. After only a moment of contest, Emilia's sword broke with a crisp snap.

Sirius: "You, damn...!"

With a look of glee, Sirius used her wrist to knock Emilia back. If the flaming chain made contact, she would be in trouble.

Emilia's beautiful face was about to be deformed, but, in that moment,

Emilia: "Hahh!"

Sirius's wrist bounced back up; Emilia's sword of ice had deflected her.

Sirius: "Ah ah aaaah! Ah ah ah ah ah! Just die already!"

Sirius's cries of wrath pierced the air as she swung both arms over her head.

The center of the area she was targeting was occupied by Emilia.

Emilia's ice blade extended at the hilt, changing shape into a hammer. Sirius met its blow with both hands, retreating, only to be pursued by Emilia.

Emilia: "Haah! Hahh! Yah!"

Sirius: "Disgusting! Half-witch! Maggot! Fly! Insect! Loathsome bug!"

Through use of centrifugal force and control over her body, Emilia demonstrated an unimaginable show of combat.

Against the ice hammer, the flame wielding Sirius had been reduced to defense. Looking at Emilia's one-sided attack, Subaru, as an observer, judged that she would triumph. Even so,

Subaru: “This isn’t the time to be in a trance! No, Emilia!”

Beatrice: “Subaru, you can’t be distracted right now, in fact.”

If Emilia killed Sirius, the last DEATH would certainly repeat itself.

Although Subaru had foreseen this crisis, Beatrice quickly scolded him. Subaru, wondering what had happened, followed Beatrice’s gaze.

Crowd: “—Dirty insect.”

Subaru: “—Crap.”

The members of the crowd behind Sirius were all flushed with anger.

The crowd looked at Subaru and Beatrice and made cursing gestures reminiscent of Sirius—in fact, they were sharing her WRATH.

That wave of anger focused on Subaru.

Subaru: “It’s not just sharing feelings, but also doing things like brainwashing a crowd into acting on her will.”

Beatrice: “Identifying the situation is good, I suppose. If a solution doesn’t exist, then all we can do is escape, in fact!”

As Subaru groaned, considering his troubles, Beatrice immediately jumped onto his back.

The crowd advanced toward Subaru.

Subaru: “Emilia, help stall for us!”

Emilia: “I won’t be too messy about it!”

Receiving her strong reply, Subaru broke into a sprint, fleeing from the crowd. Fortunately, the pace of the masses who had lost their rationality was far from normal.

They chased Subaru with hands outstretched, empty wrath in their gazes, looking not unlike zombies. The main different was that rather than wanting to eat Subaru, they wanted to tear him apart with their hands.

Subaru: “If we keep stalling like this, someone could come...”

Beatrice: “Even if someone comes, without figuring out the conditions of victory, it would be meaningless, in fact. Even if Reinhard comes, would he be able to solve this, I suppose?”

Subaru: “In short, our worries won’t end even if he comes...”

In any case, the one who could summon Reinhard, Larkins, was presently part of the crowd threatening Subaru. He was one of the people pushing forward,

trying to be the first to reach Subaru.

Subaru was uncertain of what action to take before solving Sirius's emotional link.

Subaru: "So we have to think of something!"

Crowd: "Dirty insects!"

A man leapt at Subaru, who ducked his head and threw himself past his opponent's arms, before sweeping the man off of his feet and sending his body flying.

The masses showed no consideration to the tumbling man until he knocked them over. Turning from this bowling-like scene, Subaru spoke.

Subaru: "They're so angry that they aren't thinking at all."

Beatrice: "However, that isn't what I would recommend, in fact. In such an atmosphere, they probably won't hesitate about killing whatever is near them, I suppose."

Subaru: "That won't do!"

He didn't want any sacrifices.

The reason why Subaru fought so hard for so many was precisely this.

Of course, Subaru understood the scope of his wish.

There were many things he wanted to protect. However, there was a limit to how much he could reach.

Of course. Subaru wasn't an omnipotent being.

Subaru: "However, I'm the one who chooses that limit!"

Beatrice: "That's Betty's Subaru, in fact!"

Hearing the greatest possible support from his back, Subaru drew his whip.

I'll save as many lives as I can. So please forgive me for any injuries — that was Subaru's train of thought. Aiming at the feet of the crowd, his whip launched through the air.

With the crack of a small thunderbolt, the whip hit the stone pavement.

Although it wasn't lethal, it was still a weapon, and, when wielded mercilessly, could produce the an incapacitating degree of power.

If maybe, after witnessing that power, the mass of people be cowed into retreating,

Subaru: “It won’t go that smoothly.”

Then, there was no other way.

Subaru swept his whip through the crowd, this time targeting the leading figure. A medium stature, light blue hair, sharp eyes — wasn’t that Larkins?

Attacking people who he knew would make Subaru feel sad.

Subaru: “Although this aches my heart, I can’t let myself be torn apart either. Sorry, Chin!”

Larkins: “I’m not Chin!?”

Subaru lashed his whip at Larkins’s feet and yanked upward. His body spun in a half circle, and he caught the people surrounding him as he fell.

The fallen members of the crowd blocked its advance. In order to reach Subaru, they needed to find another route.

Subaru: “Right, they can’t think... in that case, as long as I—”

Just as he was about to say “stall long enough”, Subaru felt a chill rise on his back.

To Subaru, that chill was like the imposing intimacy of his gloomy lover. Even if he were reluctant to meet her, she gave Subaru the help he needed most.

They had that kind of complex relationship.

— That was the breath of DEATH.

Subaru: “Ah!”

Beastman: “You maggot!”

A large blade whistled toward Subaru, accompanied by a shrill wind.

The beastman had leapt from the crowd, aiming at Subaru’s neck. Although he had prominent pointed canine ears, his nose and mouth seemed to resemble the cunning charm of a fox.

The half-fox, using his white tail as a brace, was unaffected by Subaru’s tricks as he took another heavy swing.

Subaru: “Beako!”

Beatrice: “Shamak!”

Beastman: “— —!?”

In a serious confrontation, Subaru could be cut down in only five seconds.

In a flash, Subaru had determined the difference in their power, and called Beatrice's name. She immediately realized Subaru's intention and cast a Shamak which enveloped the beastman's face.

His slender body and large sword were also engulfed by the dark fog, stripping his combat effectiveness away.

Subaru: "Does that cut off the link with the others?"

Beatrice: "There's nothing to that effect, I suppose. Even take the fighting, the link itself did not cut off, in fact! Most likely, that compulsion will stop only taking effect after that freak dies, I suppose!"

Subaru: "What do we do!?"

Beatrice: "Betty is desperately thinking, in fact!"

Solving that mystery was a task best left up to Beatrice.

The only thing that Subaru could do was to give Beatrice ample time to survey and think, and to keep the brainwashed masses from disturbing her.

Subaru: "And on Emilia-tan's side—?"

Subaru turned his gaze to Emilia, who was still busy confronting Sirius.

During this year, Emilia had dedicated her time both to learning about politics

and combat.

Her combat effectiveness was much higher than Subaru's.

Even so, Subaru worried about Emilia, not because he thought he was better, but because Subaru was a man and Emilia was a woman, nothing more.

Most people would probably dismiss that worry as meaningless.

Emilia: "Hahh! Yah! Hah!"

Emilia was shouting slightly listless battle cries, but Sirius was ignoring all of them.

Emilia spun around, her sword slashing toward Sirius's hand, who whipped her burning chain through the air and knocked the blade away while cursing angrily.

With a crash, ice fragmented into powder and dispersed, but Emilia had already formed a spear, which stuck upward with, its defensive power sending Sirius flying away.

She was making use of her huge store of mana, refining the weapons of ice for the purpose of carrying out destruction.

Subaru had named this combat technique Arts: Ice Blade, in honor of its illusory beauty which reminded him of a ice fairy from tales of fantasy.

The wreckage of smashed ice illustrated the intensity of the fierce battle between Emilia and Sirius. Fighting with fire and ice, the fiery heated battle between the two warriors wielding opposing arms continued to unfold on the frosty stage.

Emilia: “Haah!”

Emilia spun around, twirling her spear at Sirius, knocking her back. She immediately followed up with another blow, lashing out with the tip of the spear. Sirius nimbly twisted her body in mid air, avoiding her strike and capturing the spear in her grip.

Sirius: “Blazing! Boiling! Burning! My heart is trembling! Ah ah aaaaAAAAAH!
This is

WRATH!

Emilia: “Ah!?”

As if echoing her call, the intense heat redoubled its efforts.

Emilia's spear was consumed by the blaze as she involuntarily released it, leaving no remains.

Sirius: “Your dity amethyst eyes, your dirty bell-like voice, your dirty silky silver hair, your dirty fair skin, your dirty cute face! Those all exist purely to seduce men! Ah, such lust! You bitch, you dirty whore! Just die! You just want

But had Emilia been affected by Sirius's cries? Her face, which had previously worn a strong sense of purpose, seemed to have slackened.

Subaru: "—This is bad."

After catching a glance of the side of Emilia's face, Subaru's instincts began to scream of bad news.

There was no basis. But Subaru was sure.

Emilia's expression had changed, that is, had adopted the feelings of Sirius.

She was still fighting on, and her movements had not dulled. Even so, that response had indeed happened.

Emilia had fallen prey to Sirius's power.

However, she hadn't immediately fallen into the palm of Sirius's hand.

Emilia, currently in a defensive battle, was still matching Sirius blow for blow. She wasn't as far gone as the crowd, as was just as lovely as usual.

Then, inspecting the situation,

Subaru: "When Sirius first appeared, why weren't Emilia, Beako, and I affected by her emotional link?"

Just as Emilia and Beatrice had resisted her power just as Reinhard had. Was there any individual trait, or something similar to that, which they shared? Subaru's initial assumption had been that Reinhard would be able to resist it just because he was Reinhard.

But if there was in fact a specific reason, then he could start hypothesizing.

Subaru, who had seen Sirius three times, could now resist her like this — that was also something to take into consideration.

If that was the key to a breakthrough —

Subaru: "Bea..."

Beatrice: "Subaru!!"

The moment Subaru had wanted to convey his newfound realization, an anxious cry echoed in his ears.

As Subaru's eyes widened, something collided with his right side.

Subaru: "Guu—"

His body folded into a K shape from the power of the blow, and Subaru immediately hopped to the left, attempting to lessen its impact. As he coughed up stomach acid, he attempted to check the damage the blow had caused.

The blindfolded woman, moving like a shadow, had suddenly approached him. That defenseless looking woman had delivered a rather piercing blow into Subaru's side.

Beatrice: "Subaru! Don't die, I suppose!"

Subaru: "Even I wouldn't reach a game over from that... but that hit was super effective...!"

Although his ribs ached, Subaru judged that his other bones and internal organs hadn't been harmed. He judged that it wasn't too serious. As long as there was no internal bleeding.

Subaru: "This guy and that guy too, why are these enemies so troublesome?"

Beatrice: "Either Subaru looks unreliable just because the enemies are strong, or because he himself is too weak, in fact."

Subaru: "Really, you...!"

His whip bounced as it chased her feet, and as she turned her attention to below her, Subaru tossed a handful of grit in her face. Although it didn't affect her blindfolded eyes, it distracted her enough for Subaru to throw himself at her shoulder.

Subaru: "My lack of fighting strength seems to have come in handy. If the

attack had been serious, I probably would have died on the spot.”

Beatrice: “...although I can’t say that that’s something I’d accept eagerly, that works, since we have more trouble coming up, I suppose.”

Beatrice reiterated her annoying remarks about Subaru, who breathed a sigh of relief after defeating the blindfolded woman. He tilted his head in a gesture of “I’m not listening” as Beatrice frowned and gestured with her chin.

She indicated the large waterway connected to the square.

Subaru: “You’re kidding me...”

Subaru moaned as he caught sight of the waterway, where another gathering of enraged people had emerged.

Beatrice: “Betty thinks that they heard the commotion and rushed over to see what’s happening, in fact.”

Subaru: “The entered the scope of her power and were swallowed... are you serious? Is her ability contagious on a wide scale?”

— Panic, fear, madness, would be transmitted between people.

The feelings and feelings shared by Schiller's are precisely the result of the factual reflection of that phenomenon.

Ah, so that was it. The severity of her threat, her poison which was worse than even Petelgeuse's.

Subaru: "The more you try to flee, the more victims she finds... how can that be stopped!?"

Beatrice: "However, something is off about this entire situation, I suppose.. Subaru knocked over that woman, and I cast Shamak on that man. Try coupling that with how Tonchinkan's injury didn't appear on anyone else, in fact."

Because the situation was pressing, Subaru didn't correct Beatrice's mistake of calling Chin "Tonchinkan". What was more, the details that Beatrice had just pointed out could serve as a basis for speculating on the conditions of Sirius's emotional link.

Subaru: "...are we going to have to defeat that whole crowd too?"

Beatrice: "If Subaru has the fighting ability to do that, then we can go for it, I suppose. —Betty's Shamak can also lend a hand in stripping their consciousness away, in fact."

Although a cruel means, that had indeed been Subaru's initial plan.

He could avoid putting himself through unnecessary worry. Subaru needed to avoid the expansion of such a disastrous situation. Now, to act on Beatrice's proposal—

Emilia: “Ah!”

Subaru: “Emilia!?”

Subaru attention was diverted to Emilia’s pained cry.

He turned and saw her lying on the slate ground of the square, with Sirius, who was brandishing her flaming wrists, looking down at her.

Sirius: “Growing! Growing! LOVE culminates! That quantity is power! There is love for all! Everyone! Human beings love each other, and with that union! They can share thoughts, they can share wishes, and, be it joy or sadness, they can talk to each other and share their feelings! In that case, this is the inevitable result! The half-witch isn’t included in the bond of LOVE and should just disappear like a crushed insect!”

Emilia, who had held the initial advantage, had gradually lost her footing until the two were about even.

As time dragged on, had Sirius’s strength increased, or had Emilia’s strength decreased? Whatever the case, this was the situation now. Emilia looked at Sirius with regret.

Emilia: “Something’s off. What you’re saying is right, but... it somehow feels wrong too. Why?”

Sirius: “Because you go against the truth! Because you dirty half-being cannot understand LOVE as long as you live, you will not know LOVE when you die! The existence of a half-witch is in and of itself is evil! Even your birth, even the

meeting of your father and mother are wrong! The union of trash and insects birthed an unholy dirty combination of the two that needs to end its existence here!”

Emilia: “——hk!”

At the end of that unbearable tirade, Emilia’s eyes changed.

Kind and gentle as she was, Emilia couldn’t face such harsh words, which demeaned not only her existence, but even her parents’ meeting.

Biting her lip, Emilia pushed against the slate ground, leaping to her feet. Her enraged gaze trained on Sirius, a silvery shimmer gathered in her hand.

Emilia: “——”

Her sword slashed through Sirius’s coat, splitting it wide open.

Emilia, in her rage, would stop for nothing as she took another swing at Sirius, her sword of ice reaching the thin body in front of her —

Emilia: “— Eh?”

???: “Mmphm!”

— Subaru saw the chained girl and froze.

A blonde, curly haired girl, bound in the same manner that Lusbel had been, blood pouring from her mouth, sobbed. Her small body was firmly bound to Sirius's.

Tina — the name flashed through Subaru's memory.

Sirius: "—The anger in you is scary."

Subaru who had noticed the girl, and Emilia, who saw the girl's tears, were overtaken by rage. And at that moment, Sirius gave her most ferocious smile yet as a wave of heat blew Emilia's body away with alarming momentum.

The explosion whistled through the air as Emilia was knocked backwards. She flew across the stone, tumbling until coming to a stop at the very center of the square.

Emilia: "Gah, ugh..."

Emilia moaned as she writhed in pain. Sirius gazed at Emilia as she lifted her burning arms.

Then, she clapped her hands.

Sirius: "An insect shouldn't give me such a sweet passion. It's incredibly disgusting."

Emilia: "——"

Sirius: “Well, thank you. I'm sorry.”

With her wrists held over her head, Sirius's fierce flame roared once again.

Even steel would melt with just a touch of that flame. If it touched her directly, then not even a shadow of Emilia would be left behind. She'd be completely burned from the world.

If he didn't act right now, he wouldn't be able to save her. And not saving Emilia was unacceptable. Subaru clearly understood all this, and yet,

Subaru: “Move already, feet!”

Tina: “Mmph!”

Subaru's feet were trembling with something like fear, leaving him unable to walk.

Subaru's inaction had begun the moment he'd rested eyes on the terrified girl bound to Sirius.

Beatrice, on his back, was similarly unable to move.

Maybe feelings could be shared with spirits. But now wasn't the time to ponder that.

Subaru: “Emilia...”

His throat vibrated but he couldn't even call the name of the girl who he loved so deeply.

Emilia certainly couldn't have heard him.

Emilia's thoughts as she lay on the stone floor, unable to move, watching the imminent catastrophe unfold before her very eyes.

— Even those would be scorched by an unforgiving fire, leaving them forever a mystery.

A terrifying heat baked the slate ground, and, as the heat wave became the impact, the world was dyed a brilliant gold.

Faced with this fantastical scene, Subaru's knees shook, and he collapsed on the spot. Beatrice: “Suba... ru...”

Beatrice, still clinging to his back, called to Subaru in a stuttering voice.

Subaru couldn't respond. His line of sight remained fixed on the ground beneath him, as he refused to face reality, swallowed by an overwhelming dread.

Right now, if he looked up, he would lose to fear.

No, the heart he'd long lost to fear would shatter and break.

If he had to see Emilia turn to ash, if he had to see Emilia vanish from the world, then—

Beatrice: "Su-Subaru. Subaru!"

Even so, Beatrice continued desperately calling Subaru's name.

His head was knocked several times, but Subaru could only embrace his horrified and timid heart, shaking his heads slowly.

He couldn't. Even if that madwoman were standing right in front of him, Subaru would— ???: "—I caught up."

However, the moment he heard that sound, Subaru's heart shook off that fear. Rather than fear the sight in front of him, he feared being left in the dark.

Raising his head, he looked to the direction of the sound — the place where Emilia had been incinerated.

There, a man stood.

Smoke rose from the charred rocks, which still crackled with heat.

In the midst of that destruction, the man assumed a leisurely pose.

There, in his arms—

Subaru: “Emi... lia?”

In the man's arms, there rested a girl who should have disappeared in flame.

Although she had passed out from exhaustion, she was physically unhurt.

Emilia had lost her consciousness from the cumulation of her wounds, exhaustion, and fear, but she was peacefully resting, safe and sound.

Subaru: “You...”

The character who had suddenly appeared and saved Emilia's life.

His horrified heart was denying him a celebration of Emilia’s safety, Subaru involuntarily voiced his wavering thoughts with a similarly trembling voice.

The man who heard and turned around.

Then, he spoke.

???: “I came to meet her, so it's great that I was able to catch up.”

Subaru: “To... meet? What’s that supposed to...”

???: “Isn’t it a matter of course that I come to meet a woman who I intend to take as a my bride?” At that abrupt utterance, Subaru fell speechless.

At Subaru’s stiff lack of breath, the man, a white-haired youth, laughed lightly.

Regulus: “I am the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishop of Greed. —Regulus Corneas.” It was not intended to boast, but rather speak for granted facts.

Regulus: “As promised — I’m here to take her as my 79th wife.”

Chapter 25: Leo's Theatre

An enigmatic, white-haired youth suddenly entered the barren, chaotic battlefield that had been ripped asunder by ice and fire.

His white hair was neither too long nor too short, without any distinct style. His figure was also neither too muscular nor too slim; he had a medium build which gave the impression that he was on the verge of floating away and being swallowed up by the masses.

But,

Subaru: "Archbishop... of Greed...?!"

The mediocre young man's self-introduction left quite an impact on Subaru. As long as Subaru's ears hadn't committed a fatal mistake, then that young man was in fact a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.

That statement certainly wasn't a lie.

If that wasn't the case, then how else could he have been unscathed from Sirius's final attack?

—Such an anomaly was impossible.

Regulus: "Even so, it's great that I caught up. After all, my bride nearly turned

to ash. Even I, who rarely express any particular expectations, do hope that there's someone who can help maintain my bride's humanity. More than that being a matter of merit, I think that it's a matter of course. After all, I cannot commit a perversion of sexuality like devoting my love to ashes."

Like this, bringing with him a fear that refused to dissipate, weaving such words about Emilia, the young archbishop who called himself Regulus stood before the quivering Subaru.

Although he spoke smoothly and fluently, the contents of his discourse were empty, as if he were just repeating the same joke over and over.

Emilia, who was forced to listen to that joke, didn't stir. She seemed to have completely lost consciousness, her slender form only lying prone in his arms.

Regulus raised a finger to the white hair on his eyebrows.

Regulus: "Although it's gratifying to see nothing wrong, it seems regrettable that I can't reveal my heroism to my bride today. I think that a heroic rescue in the midst of a dead end crisis brings two people people's hearts to a very important place. Well, after all, the combination of the two is already an established fact and the only question is of the timing. Isn't it great?"

Subaru: "You, what have you been saying...?"

Regulus: "Hmm?"

Regulus, who had been speaking his self-righteous truth, discovered Subaru and frowned upon him. He then gave a very tired sounding breath.

Regulus: “Don’t you understand basic concepts like politeness? The first thing I did was give a self introduction. To ask why you're going to introduce yourself, that's because it's the most important thing to start as a relationship. No matter what kind of relationship, isn’t it necessary to start with an acquaintanceship where we both know each other? So, just because I'm someone who cares about such things, I often think that no matter to whom, I will be as friendly as possible. I’m not saying that there isn’t a chance that the other party is shy. Even if you think you want to become well-connected, when you start by introducing yourself, something in you

always cannot help but hesitate. Out of consideration for those types of people, I try to introduce myself as much as possible and act in order to create a space where they feel comfortable. Of course, I don’t expect this grace to be immediately obvious. However, I do have hopes that after some time, they will be able to detect the meaning of an introductions. Or, rather, that they will become aware of it. Or is it natural to talk to someone you meet for the first time without introducing yourself? If that’s the case, then there’s a slight difference between my common sense and culture. In that case, although both parties feel a sense of obligation, it becomes necessary to refuse the other side in advance so as to prevent a misunderstanding. Isn’t that so different from what I said before, taking being gentle with each other for granted? In fact, saying so feels impolite. And that’s a loss of etiquette, and the other party is left with a lesser value. A false assessment of each other’s value imposes on others. This is a violation of the rights of others. From any rational perspective, this is an infringement of my rights.”

Subaru: “Oh. Ohh...? S-Sorry... my name is Natsuki Subaru.”

A frenzied look rose in Regulus’s eyes as he prattled on, serving as a warning

siren to Subaru.

Acting on that fear, Subaru trembled as he gave his name.

Then, hearing Subaru's introduction, Regulus squinted his widened eyes.

Regulus: "...Yes, that's fine. Because giving respect invites respect. Although the conditions for achieving a world that creates both is taken for granted, You don't have to seek the happiness of others. As long as you pursue your happiness, others will also correspondingly find happiness.

Don't get caught up in your desires, just accept your truths and feel satisfied with your everyday needs. That is the peaceful way of life."

It would perhaps be worth questioning whether or not his smooth speech was serious. But his bright eyes proved that his words neither joking nor ironic; rather, they were his genuine beliefs.

Taking his words out of context would perhaps make them seem like Sirius's.

In fact, Regulus's demeanor and words held the same superficiality and distortion as those of Sirius.

Regulus: "After all, is it really so hard to find the proper mood to converse in? Why is it impossible to do this as a matter of course for mankind? Why is it impossible to consciously, unconsciously, indifferently, continue to cause subtle harm to others in the days when such things are done? Subtle injuries hurt,

don't they? On top of that, if anything serious works its way in, it might grow into a life-threatening disease. The body and the soul are one. I hate those who misunderstand life to the extent that they unconsciously threaten others. Don't their minds seem warped?"

Subaru: "....."

Regulus: "Obviously, they're flawed as human beings, and it isn't okay for that behavior to remain unconscious. It is, of course, wrong to impose a burden on those who are discriminated against. Most people have common sense, but why can't they consciously realize that the world is slowly turning on? Even without realizing that they're trampling upon the hidden hearts of others, if they don't become conscious of their twisted, flawed mistakes, then don't their feet just keep trampling and trampling?"

As if unhappy with Subaru's silence, Regulus repeatedly pressed for an answer.

Regulus's speech was gradually becoming faster and faster, clearly conveying an increase in excitement. Even so, Subaru still could not respond.

At the thought of giving a response, his heart flinched.

Subaru: "All that said, don't you know..."

Sirius: "Thanks for the lesson. —BURN, SCORCH AND DISAPPEAR!!"

A cascade of fire poured down from behind Regulus.

Sirius had waved her arms to summon a flame which mercilessly consumed her fellow archbishop. Subaru, witnessing this atrocity, found himself once again unable to move.

Beatrice: "Subaru..."

Subaru: "I... know. But, it's okay."

Beatrice, also trembling in fear, gripped Subaru's shoulders until they hurt. She too worried about Emilia, who had been caught in the flame.

It was impossible for Subaru not to fear the violence that had involved Emilia. Even so, he held a steadfast belief. That was,

Regulus: "—I say, to interrupt someone else's conversation like that, how awful are you at reading the mood? If you want to say something, speak up, raise your hand. Do you think I have the presence of mind to just wait for you to speak up?"

Regulus twisted his wrist, and the vortex of flame vanished.

The heat waves dissipated as if dismissed by magic, while Regulus, standing at the center of the vortex, remained untouched. Naturally, Emilia, resting in his arms was still in the same state.

Even engulfed by the flames of that intensity, not a single drop of sweat

surfaced on his face.

Regulus: “You and I share the title of Archbishop. Since I know that that your head is messed up,

if you’d only made a little mistake, I could have turned a gentle blind eye. Fortunately, there was no harm done. Only...”

Turning away, Regulus lowered his voice and glared at Sirius, who bore that gaze as she closed her coat, once again hiding the girl bound to her from the surroundings, gritting her teeth all the while.

Regulus: “You were planning to burn this girl along with me. I would be a little reluctant to say that I will forgive that kind of behavior. Ah, it’d be better to say that it would be impossible. Since ancient times, no matter what the story or the morality of the characters, if one’s loved ones are hurt, then their anger is inevitable. Because that is a right that everyone has, I am well within my rights to take revenge.”

Sirius: “Anger! Hah, did you get angry!? Don’t make me laugh! A superficial and insignificant man like you can’t speak so lightly about anger! Anger is mine! It’s what I got from him, and it’s more important to me than anything else. To...”

Regulus: “Ohh, I see. Are you still clinging to the idiot who kept on risking death? How

annoying, how disgusting. That’s neither constructive nor rational. Death is the end. This is a matter of course, isn’t it? Unwilling to admit even that and

clinging to just memories... You

really are flawed. If someone who you love dies, find the next one. Rather than yelling about love, love, love, exercise the rights you've been granted. Disrupting that natural cycle, ah, you really are hopeless scum.

Sirius: "You, who laughed at that person's death, TO SPEAK SO ARROGANTLY!!"

Sirius, who had been relentlessly demeaned, flew into a rage.

The stone flooring cracked at the mercy of the madwoman's stomp as she directed her twin flames forward, which flew toward Regulus at an alarming rate. A burning, tearing sound accompanied the weapon on its lethal journey.

The chain hit Regulus's flesh, striking his cheek to one side. However, neither Sirius's fury nor the chain's attacks had been calmed by that single blow.

Left to right, top to bottom, front to back, Sirius's copper chains beat relentlessly at Regulus's body. On top of that, the chains, flying at incredibly high speeds, projected waves of heat as well.

Sirius: "Disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear! TURN TO ASH ALONG WITH THAT HATEFUL HALF-WITCH!!"

The fence of flame closed at the center, trapping Regulus in that raging inferno.

The temperature of that storm was high enough to melt the floor tiles where Regulus stood, and the ground beneath him either evaporated or sunk to form depressions.

Witnessing the burning result, Sirius's breaths grew wild.

Sharing her wrath, the crowd of wild-blooded people around her bled from their eyes and noses, making strange sounds as they gathered together.

Regulus: "I say, how many times do I need to tell you the same thing?"

Regulus stepped forward on the red stone slab as if nothing had happened.

Whether it was his white hair, his clothes, or Emilia's arms, nothing held a trace of scratches.

Only his expression had changed into one of childish dissatisfaction.

Regulus: "I've thought about it. No matter how many times the same thing is said, some people can't understand. They don't care enough give enough effort to understand what is said. Is that contempt? So, whether carving what they've learned in their hearts as commandments, or doing careful self-examinations, or remembering it was food for thought for tomorrow, they don't do any of that. They forget, and it's cleansed away. Saying the same thing over and over again is not only blasphemy, but also contempt which gives negative impacts to both parties. Both their own value and the value of the other party are fundamentally degraded. That's how it is. It's a form of violence that disregards words and actions. Then I thought of it."

Sirius: “You damn insect...!”

Regulus: “The Witch Cult’s doctrine goes like this, ‘If one cheek is hit, present the other cheek and ask your opponent why they fight as they do’. This shows a valuable lesson of mutual understanding. Ah, but I’ve thought of this too. It’s also true that someone whose cheek has been beaten should fight back. — That’s especially necessary against those who don’t know pain.”

Only listening to the content of that speech would make it seem very stern.

But Regulus was a distorted existence.

Regulus: “—”

Regulus, who stepped out from the dark, wore a grim smile.

That smile was certainly no friendly gesture; rather, it was closer to the licking of a tongue as a predator surveyed his prey.

It was still unknown how Regulus had defended against Sirius’s flame and chain. Perhaps his power was purely defensive; perhaps the Authority of Greed granted no means of attack.

Therefore, it is clear that the behavior of Regulus should not be conclusive evidence of fatal consequences.

— But, if the battle dragged on, Sirius would die.

And there was no guarantee that Regulus was a holder of purely defensive abilities.

If that young man pulled anything, there was no doubt that Sirius will die. If that is the case, there is no problem at all. In fact, having the number of archbishops reduced due to infighting would be worthy of celebration.

However, although gratifying, Sirius's death would involve most of the people surrounding her. Of course, this included Subaru, as well as all the people trapped in the Sirius's wrath, and certainly Lusbel and Tina, who prayed for one another's safety and sacrificed themselves.

Subaru: “——”

Even now, fear was spreading all over the Subaru's body.

His slack knees trembled so much that even breathing became an abnormal act.

But, even in this case.

Beatrice: “Subaru.”

In his ear, a weak, unreliable voice echoed.

Although the owner obviously could not hide her trembling fear, her warm voice still spoke up from behind him. Rely on me — it was conveying a message something like that.

Subaru clenched his teeth and staggered to his feet.

He refused to be unable to do anything and delegate everything to the slight weight of the child on his back. Having said that, he wouldn't be able to do anything at all without her strength.

Therefore, Subaru refused to struggle alone, but also refused to throw everything to one person.

If Subaru had been alone then he would have remained on his knees.

The reason why Subaru could stand was because he wasn't alone. The other people engulfed by the madness were different. Only Subaru had someone close by, only Subaru wasn't by himself.

Tightly clinging to that real feeling, Subaru fought his feat.

Subaru: "Beatrice."

Beatrice: "I know, in fact."

With only a single call, Beatrice could fully understand what he needed.

Confirmation with each other was unnecessary. Each of them doing their utmost to accomplish each of their respective responsibilities — as long they did that, they should arrive at their desired outcome.

Whether it be Sirius or Regulus, the cultists had completely forgotten about Subaru.

They could only see each other and intended to kill one another. The best result would be Sirius burning Regulus to ash, but that would be impossible.

Therefore, Subaru needed to stop Regulus's rampage.

Subaru had to attract Regulus's attention to himself and take measures against creating a large number of victims.

And, above all,

Subaru: "Stop touching my Emilia...!"

An inexhaustible love pushes the fear from Subaru and lights his heart. If he didn't first address his dishonest heart then he'd never be able to fight Regulus.

At the moment, Regulus's back was facing Subaru, and his attention was being completely diverted by Sirius, which was a great convenience for Subaru.

Beatrice: “—Shamak!”

As Subaru forced his trembling legs to move, Beatrice began chanting a spell from behind him.

Her powerful spell, Shamak, covered Regulus's body in a black haze as it began to sever him from the world, beautifully hindering his pace. Right before Regulus was engulfed, Subaru took a combat position and fiercely whisked his whip forward.

He was aiming at Regulus's neck.

His whip followed through as it attempted to ensnare Regulus. Surely with this much commotion even the arrogant Regulus would have to attention to Subaru. Perhaps at the point where Beatrice had draped the curtain there was even a possibility that Regulus would fall victim without realizing what had happened.

Subaru: “There's no response!”

Beatrice: “He's coming!!”

Beatrice's warning had come after a heavy sense of anxiety had already hit Subaru. His whip passed through thin air and the missing presence of its target was painfully obvious.

The next moment, a white-haired youth kicked off of the ground toward Subaru, lunging from the black haze.

Regulus: “This has been messy from the very beginning. You’ve been stirring up my smooth life with your magic. Could you evaporate off somewhere?”

Beatrice: “M-Mu, Murak!”

Regulus held Emilia with his right hand as his empty left hand suddenly swiped at Subaru. Beatrice immediately gave up performing an attack in favor of casting a gravity altering spell on Subaru.

Subaru immediately affirmed Beatrice’s judgment and leapt upward to avoid Regulus’s reaching fingertips. Murak is a type of shadow magic with the effect of freeing a physical object from the tethers of gravity. Subaru’s flesh was now lighter than a feather. He flew upward, leaving Regulus behind.

Regulus: “Why do you want to avoid it?”

Subaru: “Why wouldn’t I avoid it, it’s scary!”

Subaru cast his whip at Regulus again, who had looked overhead at Subaru. Rather than aim for any particular direction, Subaru only struck, hitting Regulus’s head. His white hair floated outward from the impact and the head that should have been lacerated by the whip was uninjured. The same held true for his windswept hair.

Regulus: “What if my bride had been injured? Don’t you think that’s it’s a matter of course that girls should be treated gently, and that it’s not something that needs to be taught? Don’t you even understand this?”

Subaru: “Don’t be stupid! The person I want to treat the most gently in this world is that girl. What’s with the, ‘bride this and bride that’, that you’ve been talking about...”

Regulus: “It’s been decided. It’s destiny. —After all, I made a promise in my dreams.”

One hand bracing himself against the wall, Subaru was dumbfounded by Regulus’s smiling reply. Something felt awry but Regulus clearly did not care.

Regulus: “She will connect with me. That’s fate, you know. I feel generally satisfied with myself, and I don’t want anything at all. And although I don’t particularly desire anything, I’m not so narrow-minded that I wouldn’t accept what’s given to be. Especially what fate’s given to me. Although most people do not expect this, anything within I can reach, I want to guard. That would be myself and the people who are important to me.”

Subaru: “——”

Regulus: “I will protect her. I’ll welcome her as my bride and love her as she’ll love me, and together we’ll enjoy a stable life. Therefore, for the sake of that, I won’t refrain from exerting the power that I’ve been given.”

Subaru: “Then, what... then what about her own will? Obviously, one of the parties hasn’t consented yet, so getting engaged like this is rash.”

Regulus’s stern statement had just confirmed his convictions.

On one hand, this was a straightforward, righteous, and harmless way of thinking. On the other, it was ridiculous to a deadly extent.

It was difficult to explain why it was deadly but it was something that was clear from the very beginning. Because Regulus had fallen into a frenzy, everything had gone off track.

Subaru's voice trembled but not just with fear. To his question, Regulus smiled and continued as though discussing a disposable topic.

Regulus: "Are you worried about me? If that's the case, thank you. However, there isn't any problem. Fate is inevitable... in particular, in love or friendship, a person's words can not be

established. If fate told me that she would be my bride, then I am fated to be her groom, this is all something that's already been decided."

Beatrice: "...something is completely wrong with him, in fact."

Toward Regulus and his flawed theory, Beatrice leaks a subconscious murmur of disgust.

Subaru held the same opinion. Regulus used pretty, smooth words to cover up the underlying madness in his beliefs. Subaru didn't even want to know the extent of trouble that those sentiments would bring.

Subaru: "I've had enough. It's impossible for us to understand each other. It's

disgusting to admit that such a horrible person is a rival for love.”

Subaru removed his hand from the wall and allowed himself to float back to the earth.

Looking at the silent Subaru, Regulus nodded as if he'd grasped the main idea.

Regulus: “I see. I understand. You know, I'm sorry to say, but... the fate of a lover can't be shared. I find a bride who admires others to be quite unattractive.”

Subaru: “Shut it! Emilia-tan is my bride. I won't give her to someone like you.”

Regulus: “Ohh, this is Emilia. A lovely name. Very suitable for love birds to softly call, very suitable for this lovable child indeed.”

Subaru: “You don't even know her name... yet you say you want her as a bride? What a joke! What made you...?”

Regulus: “Her face.”

Subaru was choked speechless with anger.

Misunderstanding his silence, Regulus tilted his head.

Regulus: “A cute face. That's all love and whatnot is, right?”

Subaru: “Go to hell.”

Beatrice: “Drop dead, I suppose.”

Agreeing with Subaru’s assertion, Beatrice also denied Regulus his overly casual love.

Pedaling toward the ground, Subaru’s weightless body was still under the effects of Murak. As Subaru shortened the distance between them as he rode the wind, Regulus lifted his gaze, as if shocked.

At this time, Regulus could not understand the implications of a close-combat battle.

Subaru himself understood. Rather than being unintelligent, Regulus didn’t share the familiarity with battle that Sirius did. That wasn’t to say that he was unprepared; rather, he needed no weapon.

Therefore, getting close to Regulus would be nigh suicidal. Even so, Subaru had a pressing reason to enter close combat with Regulus.

— Because this was the only way he could use his ace.

Regulus: “Why did you come here? I don’t really understand. Although it’s not necessary, I do hope that you can tell me. I don’t lack thoughtfulness, after all. I want to understand even withering opponents.”

Subaru: “Thanks for enlightenment — Beako!”

Beatrice: “Ready, in fact!”

Regulus approached Subaru with his left hand extended.

Each of those fingers was likely a fatal weapon that would end Subaru’s life. Before that could happen, Subaru took a breath and shouted.

This was one of the fruits of the efforts that Subaru and Beatrice had accumulated over the course of the past year,

Subaru: “— E • M • M!!”

Regulus: “...what?”

The high-pitched chant induced Subaru’s damaged gate to absorb Beatrice’s mana to cast an exclusive magic of which no one else had yet developed.

They had launched the magic of absolute defense, E devised by Beatrice and Subaru.

MM, one of three original spells

Subaru's body would be wrapped in an invisible magical field which would allow him to Sidestep from this plane of existence, nullifying any attack on him, be it physical or magical.

Regulus's fingertips didn't bring any harm to Subaru when they reached him. Upon witnessing this incident, for the first time, Regulus revealed an expression of stiff shock.

Subaru aimed at his face and fiercely released his left fist.

Subaru: "Yah!"

Regulus: "—hk"

The side of Regulus's face was struck.

Subaru had struck him with a hard blow, but not the slightest mark had been made when

Regulus's head was pushed back. The damage had been completely invalidated. This was what

Subaru had indeed expected; an eternal and constant guardian of Regulus's flesh.

Beatrice: "Not ready yet, in fact!"

Before Regulus could counterattack, Beatrice shouted that the conditions for the next move had not yet been reached.

In this close proximity, Subaru needed to avoid Regulus's attacks. Being on the defense would make each action incredibly difficult. In that case, Subaru needed to give up part of his soul.

Regulus: "Don't worry..."

Subaru: "Invisible • Providence!"

As Regulus suffered a blow, his words were cut off.

That was because of he'd been sent flying. Subaru looked over the scene as he coughed blood, roughly wiping at the corners of his mouth with his sleeve.

Only Subaru's eyes could see his Invisible Providence.

Subaru could clearly see a black third hand protruding from his chest, coursing with a dreadful power.

His entire body creaked, his soul weakened, and something venomous flowed through his body, materializing as black blood in his throat.

After paying the price for the ability, Subaru was able to summon a full-out

attack. That blow, which consumed so much from Subaru, probably wouldn't match up to a kick from Garfiel.

Even so, that invisible attack should have a corresponding effect to the effort needed to cast it.

Beatrice: "Subaru, are you okay, in fact?"

Subaru: "Cough... somehow. And as for that guy, he's strong, but his attacks are kinda flat."

Spitting out the remainder of the blood clogging his throat, Subaru pointed out the low energy of Regulus's combat.

Regulus had revealed that he was an inexperienced layman who was at most on Subaru's level. As long as Subaru kept his concentration of words, those murderous fingertips could maybe be continually avoided.

Beatrice: "——"

Subaru's shoulder was knocked.

That was Beatrice's silent report.

Because of its potent effect, their original spells had short durations. In addition, their spells had daily limits, and overuse would result in loss of potency.

Beatrice: “Although the effects of EMM have ended, in this case, even without magic, Subaru has a chance. So, if you rush in...”

Subaru: “Victory could be waiting. I see the light of hope.”

Regulus: “There’s no such thing. I apologize for the misunderstanding. I dallied for longer than I should have, being that you’re not so interesting. But that’s not the issue here. It’s not good that we’re having a disagreement. This is a violation of rights. Since I’ve been hit twice since we started, if I don’t land an attack, that would be unfair, right?”

Regulus landed from midair, looking at the determined Subaru.

His expression had lost its original calmness and was reaching outrage.

Sirius: “Wha!?”

Subaru: “...what do you planning?”

The ground between Subaru and Regulus suddenly ignited.

Subaru was pushed backward by the wave of heat which bathed him, while Regulus bore the hot air as it blew past his face.

Obviously, the two turned to the culprit for this — Sirius.

So far, for whatever reason, the madwoman had not involved herself in the fight between Subaru and Regulus. Although the intent behind her inaction was unknown, Subaru would have preferred for her to have remained silent. Her actions resulted in a very abrupt change.

He had no means to combat Sirius's flames, and strongly preferred Regulus, who could only engage in close combat. He also had yet to find a solution to defeat her.

Subaru gulped as the situation deteriorated.

In actuality, his circumstances were far worse than what Subaru had imagined.

Sirius: "— I've found you."

Subaru: "—?"

Standing unsightly, Sirius stares at the two men staring at her — no, at only Subaru.

The madwoman had completely forgotten her desire to kill Regulus, merely staring with single-minded obsession at Subaru. Her gaze was filled with madness, Subaru's throat suddenly caught.

Then she lifted her previously lifeless, drowsy hands and pressed them to her face.

Sirius: “I’ve found you, found you, found you, found you, found you. Ah, ah, ahahah! Aaaaah! Yes, it’s really you! I’m sorry, I didn’t notice at first. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. This is great. It really is. Sure enough, you came back for me!?”

Subaru: “What……?”

Sirius: “You, where have you been!? No matter where I looked, I couldn’t find you, even after I’d torn you open, I still couldn’t find you anywhere. Even though I’d always always always always always always always always always been looking… And you noticed how I’d been searching, and you came back!”

Her high-pitched sonorous voice overflowed with an obvious enthusiasm.

Keeping her hands on her cheeks, she wriggled her body and gave a series of pleased sounds.

What kind of state was this? This odd gesture was truly unspeakable.

However, if pressed for an answer, her actions seemed similar to the behavior of someone who’d been searching for a lover for a long time. A woman who’d been consumed by blind love.

Sirius: “Because my ideal was reached! Because I want to be one with you — you finally noticed the wish that I’d been praying for! Because my Love finally reached you!”

Subaru: “——”

Sirius: “I’ve always been waiting for only you... my dear, dear Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti!”

Speaking with a mad smile, Sirius Romanee-Conti called the name of her bereaved lover as she cast a tender, affectionate look at Subaru.

Chapter 26: Spear of Love

— The already dire situation had deteriorated drastically, resulting in the worst of awful conditions.

Subaru trembled under Sirius's mesmerized gaze and her shuddering, glowing breaths.

The madwoman gave no regard to the heat scorching her bandaged face, her attention focused on watching Subaru — no, not just watching, but staring.

Subaru: "Dear... Petelgeuse?"

That was the name of a madman which Subaru had never wanted to hear again. When Sirius Romanee-Conti had been crying out for her lover, Subaru would be lying if he said that this particular theory hadn't crossed his mind.

Even so, he was reluctant to seriously consider it, as doing so would combine the existence of the lunatic Petelgeuse and the madwoman Sirius.

He didn't want to think of a union, the worst possible couple, with Romanee-Conti.

Subaru: "A couple where both lovers are Sin Archbishops is ridiculously disastrous... although it can't be helped that he'd choose a bride like that..."

Really, the Witch Cult didn't have a single normal member.

The self-righteous Petelgeuse, Sirius who imposed her love without permission, and Regulus who treated love as superficial fate — they were all scum.

Subaru: "Like how your names are bit similar. Do they all end in an 'S' sound?"

Subaru buried the rapid churning of his mind under trivial, pointless thoughts.

Right now, Subaru felt as if he'd found something very awry, although he could quite put his finger on what it was. Try as he might, he couldn't find it.

Sirius: "Please don't be so silent, Petelgeuse. You're such a mean-spirited person. See, you're already, already, already giving me that usual cold attitude... it makes me really anxious!"

Sirius, unaware of the cause of Subaru's brooding silence, took her own interpretation of it as she kept her hands on her face and her waist twisting back and forth. The nightmarish scene spread as the crowd around Sirius took up her strange, delusional expression of affection.

Regulus: "... Really, I can't deal with you anymore. Although his trick just now probably that gave you that kind of idea, it's still really rather tragic. The correct connection of fate should place you together no matter what kind of obstacles are faced. Like with me and my brides. However, a separation by life and death before results can blossom is not only sad, but very unsightly."

Sirius: “Yes, thank you very much. I’m very sorry. Now, excuse me, but I'm busy. You know, right? Mutual understanding is important. Mutual concessions are also important. You have completed your purpose, so could you leave as soon as possible? After all, I also have my own private affairs.”

Regulus: “Indeed, my purpose of finding my bride has been fulfilled.”

Sirius’s madness had given way to rationality, and Regulus overlooked that implication as he looked at Emilia, still in his arms. Then he turned toward Subaru.

Regulus: “But the one who wants to kill me and my bride, and who has been annoying since the very beginning been, has yet to allow me proper vengeance in and infringement of my rights. I dislike taking a violent initiative, but in this case, it would only be a just revenge. Yes, this is an act of righteousness. Although I could endure this and leave, I would be doing legitimacy a disfavor. That is to say, leaving would be a loss of justice. I shouldn’t set that precedent.”

Subaru: “Don’t give me that superious tone. Obviously, you don’t like me so you want to kill me. Don’t justify that with some garbage doctrine.”

Regulus: “Actually being talked back to is quite a surprise. Being spoken to as if I were mistaken is even more of a surprise. You, are you the type of people who disagrees with their opponents? In that case, the only thing I can say is that you’re small and superficial. I think that this kind of person, who can’t listen to the words of others with sincerity, will one day earn their just deserts, what do you think?”

Subaru: “Do you have the right to say this?” Regulus’s eyes widened as if incredibly taken aback.

Perhaps he was sincere, convinced that his speech was justified. No, he was absolutely convinced. If not, he couldn't be a leading subordinate in that abnormal cult.

Logical conversations were only an illusion. Although they spoke the human tongue, they were creatures belonging to an alien ecosystem.

Forgetting that would lead to being swallowed up by their honeyed words.

Regulus: "Sirius. You seem to have excluded him from your sphere of power. What happened?"

Instead of facing the silent Subaru, Regulus directed the conversation to Sirius.

Frowning at his speech, Subaru discovered that the fear which had been gripping his heart had vanished.

The fact that Beatrice was still slightly trembling on his shoulders proved that they hadn't left the range of the sphere of influence.

In other words, only Subaru had been excluded. And the reason for that was,

Sirius: "Isn't that obvious? Since I know that he's that person, if I continue to share my feelings, they might accidentally transmit to him."

Regulus: "Don't give me that shy look, it's really creepy. Having proclaimed

your love, love, love, there's no point in pretending to innocent. I really don't understand you."

Sirius: "Don't you think that allowing those inexplicable feelings that can't be expressed with words to be felt in such a manner is tasteless? Until the end of the end, until the very moment I become one with him, I'll seal that feeling inside me. I've already decided so. Yes, for the sake of Love!"

Regulus: "Because of that dishonesty, your important feelings will never be able to reach him, you know? You, Sirius Romanee-Conti, can only miss him with wholehearted continuous thoughts. Don't you think that using someone else's family name is rather disgusting? I suppose that, in a sense, it's like Petelgeuse's legacy. Well, he's already dead, so it doesn't matter anymore."

Sirius: "I'm in love with that person!"

Hearing Regulus's amazed speech, Sirius exploded.

The madwoman grasped at her hair in a frenzy, spittle flying from her mouth as she screamed at Regulus.

Sirius: "After all, whenever I gazed at him, he always met my eyes! When I touched him, he didn't scold me! When I spoke to him, he gave me his attention! When I inhaled his breath, he never told me off! I was allowed to sleep with him! I could freely borrow his things! He allowed me the honor of burning the half-witch! He gave me my name! He smiled for me! Only for me! Only for me, onlyformeonlyformeonlyforme!"

Her breathing grew wild as she sobbed tears of unrequited love.

She made herself clear.

Sirius's existence was one of dark, twisted, pure love.

Regulus: "Ah, oops. —Dealing with such strong subjective convictions is tricky."

Shrugging, Regulus spoke as if seeking agreement from Subaru.

Subaru bit back a "do you have the right to say that" to keep Regulus from lashing out. He needed to temper the balance between the two foolish extremists near him.

Facing the two cultists, Subaru saw no light of hope to break the deadlock.

Rather, the situation had worsened due to Sirius's interference.

Even if Subaru had broken away from the shared fear, there would be no marked improvement in his combat power. Obviously, Beatrice would be his main advantage, but she was trapped in an unfavorable condition, her sharp judgement dulled by terror.

At least, only facing Regulus would help.

Subaru: "...Hey, Sirius."

Sirius: "Yes, what's the matter, my dear?"

Sirius candidly responded his call.

Although Subaru astonished at the unexpectedly serious response,

Subaru: "I have a little bit private business with Regulus here, so could you wait patiently for a while? Please."

Sirius: "Do you want me to wait?"

Making use of Sirius's misunderstanding could grant Subaru a chance at victory.

Sirius appeared to have assumed Subaru was Petelgeuse due to his Invisible Providence, which resembled the Authority of Sloth's Unseen Hand. Although this was a dark path, Subaru would have to tread it.

Petelgeuse had been a spirit. If he were still alive, it was entirely possible that he would have possess Subaru as his next host.

Although, the problem would be that Subaru hadn't indicated that he'd recognized Sirius up until now, but Sirius, in her present state of mind, hadn't seemed to notice the issue.

With that in mind, Subaru hoped to break that deadlock. The result,

Sirius: "I'm sorry, I cannot do that. Please let me refuse even if it is very important to you."

Sirius ruthlessly rejected his plea.

Seeing Subaru's disappointed gaze, Sirius bowed her head.

Sirius: "Of course, I originally wanted to comply. But the diligent you have surely already decided that while I wait, you'll slip far away from my extended fingers. I know you. After all,

we've been together for so long. You'll try your utmost and overstrain yourself alone to reach your desired results... and..."

In all honesty, Subaru couldn't help but feel a heartfelt admiration for her love.

Even so, Sirius's regard of Petelgeuse's hard working nature was a rather blind perspective. After all, the Witch Cult existed to do nothing but harm.

Sirius: "Finally, finally we were able to meet again. It's been a year, a whole year, since I've been at your side. In this century, this is the longest we've been apart! And even after a year of not seeing me... you ask me to leave? I don't want to. I can't. In your period of absence of the period I always wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted to become one with you!"

Subaru: “——”

Sirius: “On top of that, you still want me to wait!? And now you have a spirit who I’ve never seen before! Where did you find her!? What exactly is appealing about woman like that!? She’s tiny, her face is arrogant, and she has neither the chest nor the bottom of a woman! Is it because she’s a spirit!? Because you’re a spirit, your woman has to be a spirit too? The time we spent together loses to such a flimsy reason? I’ll burn you.”

The direction of her speech became perverse, and became weird, and a crazed shimmer of unbridled frenzy rose in her gaze again. The crowd also left courting affection for anger, blood streaming red from their eyes and noses.

Sirius: “And, is the reason you need to deal with Regulus the half-witch in his arms? That filthy half witch! That silver haired half witch! Why are you so partial to her!? Stop immediately,

shouldn’t you have understood that long ago? That despicable, loathsome, hateful, abhorrent garbage witch...! If you revive her, I’ll burn her before your very eyes!”

Subaru: “You’re... so increasingly incomprehensible, you...”

The madwoman gave a bloodthirsty shriek, revealing her animosity toward both Emilia and the

Witch of Envy.

Wasn’t the goal of the Witch Cult the Witch of Envy’s resurrection? Subaru

couldn't understand Sirius's utter loathing for her, then.

Rather, Sirius had absolutely no resonance with the Petelgeuse she longed for.

Although he'd originally thought that they couldn't have been companions, they turned out to be nothing but enemies.

Subaru: “——”

The impasse between the three resurfaced.

Regulus planned to kill Subaru and Sirius.

Sirius would defend against Regulus and the nonexistent Petelgeuse within Subaru.

Subaru wanted to rescue Emilia from Regulus and to free Tina from Sirius, and, if possible, kill the two archbishops.

Obviously. However, the situation Subaru was in was far too harsh.

Searching for such a solution that Subaru didn't have the ability to attain, his forehead began to bead with sweat.

Return by Death, followed by Sirius's appearance and Regulus's debut. After that, a melee battle between and with the archbishops. This loop had been the

longest yet.

During that period of time, although he'd retrieved useful intelligence, nothing but awful things had happened.

Subaru: "... Beako."

Beatrice: "You can try either one, in fact."

From his back came the timid voice of Subaru's support.

Subaru, who held authority over what would happen next, made his decision.

And at that time.

Regulus: "—Oh."

Sirius: "—hk"

Simultaneously, both Regulus and Sirius both, changed their attitude.

They each put their hands into their coats, and, from their, retrieved their books.

Subaru: "That is..."

A familiar book with a heavy black binding.

At this proximity, there was no way that Subaru could have been mistaken.

That was what the Witch Cult obeyed above all else, the Gospel.

Regulus & Sirius: “— —”

Ignoring Subaru, who'd raised his guard again, the two archbishops opened their gospels and surveyed its writ.

Then, although the their timing had been identical, their expressions gave stark contrast to each other.

Regulus: “I assume the content is the same for both of us, is that true, Sirius?”

Sirius: “Shut up, Regulus. Why... why now? When finally, finally I found him again...”

Regulus wore a light smile, and Sirius, who gritted her teeth and spoke in a voice full of remorse.

Even if the predator and the madwoman held opposing feelings, their wills were unified.

The two looked to Subaru.

Regulus: “Although I’m sorry, it’s time now. My free time with you has ended. You should thank the Gospel... well, that's not right. That doesn’t make sense. After all, what’s the use in

being thankful to paper? So, rather, you should be grateful to me, who follows the Gospel faithfully.”

Subaru: “Thank you for your faith... but what was that about time? What are you talking about!?”

Regulus: “It’s just as you heard. We were given free time before we need to do what must be done. I took that meaningful time to retrieve my bride.”

Sirius: “I feel incomplete... In front of that person, I shouldn’t be subjected to such treatment. It’s too cruel. I’m being washed away by sadness, don’t you know?”

Regulus spoke with composure, while Sirius forcibly expressed her sorrow. The crowd collapsed, and Beatrice bit back her tears.

However, Subaru and Regulus both remained completely unaffected.

Regulus: “Sorry, but your small, superficial love doesn’t touch my complete self at all. At most, it makes me feel a little dirty.”

In a contemptuous voice, Regulus, with Emilia still in his arms, turned his back

to Subaru.

Really, he looked as if he were just planning to let them go. If Regulus left by himself, that was fine. But,

Subaru: “Stop, you bastard! Don’t just run off! Let her go! Otherwise, I’ll...”

Regulus: “I considered that.”

Subaru: “——!?”

Regulus stopped and only turned his head to smile.

Under that smile, Subaru felt as though a blade brushed his spine, and he swallowed, his entire body stiff.

It was impossible to prevent Regulus's next move.

Regulus: “I think that if my bride finds one of her attendants gone, she’ll be lonely, and if I don’t invite enough people, she’ll be rather fickle. — So I won’t kill you.”

Regulus tapped the ground gently with his toes.

Although it was a gesture of comfort, as if adjusting his shoes, his foot dug neatly into the stone slab as if it were a shovel driving into soft ground.

The wreckage of the slate flew toward Subaru.

Bullets of soil seemed to defy gravity. Some of them brushed the outside of Subaru's right foot

— and, in the next moment, Subaru's foot vanished. Subaru: “—Eh?”

A beast's claw had torn clear through his foot. On his right foot, the white of bone, pink of flesh, and yellow of marrow were cleanly exposed in a twisted cross section. His veins had all be severed, blossoming with blood.

Before he could comprehend what had just happened, the pain struck.

Subaru: “—hk!? Gah, ahk! aaaAAHH!?”

The world became pure white, as if his head were being punctuated by countless sharp needles.

A scream lodged in his throat, Subaru was unable to support his own weight as he tumbled to the ground. His outstretched fingers desperately held his right leg. The wound was so large that the palm of his right hand couldn't cover it.

Beatrice: “Subaru! ? Subaru! Subaru, wait, I suppose! Right now!”

Beatrice fell to the ground with the discovery of the Subaru's severe injury, and panicked as she began a chant of healing magic. Regulus nodded in satisfaction at the scene.

Regulus: “This is adequate retaliation for your reckless behavior up until just now, so I’ll let it go. Although I did consider the possibility of you doing it again, I think I still want to look forward to your future. This pain is sure to stop you if you considering hurting another person again. Don’t thank me. Just save someone else next time.”

Subaru: “aaaAA—hk! Kah, gah, can’t, kuu, gah!”

Pain, agony, suffering, hurthurthurthurthurthurthurt—!

A haze of agony. Molars being ground to dust from ghashing. A flashing world. The absence of an up and down. Was he sleeping? Or was he alive? Or maybe he was dead?

Confusion. Cluelessness. Noideanoideanoidea. Even so, there was something he needed to know.

Subaru: “E-Emili...a! Wa, gah—hk, t—hk”

Beatrice: “Subaru, you can’t afford to mess around! If you have to vomit, turn to the side. If you don’t, your throat will...”

Enduring pain and madness, Subaru moved his head. His heart beat like an alarm bell, and he began to choke up what felt like his organs.

The petite Beatrice, while desperately supporting Subaru’s body, did her best to cast healing magic. However, someone was laughing at her.

Beatrice: "You can't be serious, in fact."

Sirius: "I'm sorry. However, this obviously isn't a joke. Isn't that obvious?"

Behind Beatrice, in abhorrent whispers, Sirius replied in a dark tone.

Around Sirius, a crowd of people rolled as they screamed in pain.

All of them, with their hands on their right leg wound, desperately sought salvation.

Like Subaru, their right feet had been torn off by a beast.

Sirius: "My beloved Petelgeuse would say that feeling pain is living, and that those feelings allows Love to be exercised. I know what better than anyone. However, I believe there is a better way of representing that form of Love until then. Thank you. That representation would be becoming one. After all, Love is a prayer for becoming one! Seeing the same sights, feeling the same emotions, living the same life, ending with the same death, that is Love!"

Opening her hands, her hands hit each other in a burst of clapping.

Sirius gave harsh puffs of air as she fixed her intense, envious gaze on Beatrice.

Sirius: “No matter who, everyone should experience the same feelings as him. However, only you and that dirty half-witch will be denied that experience. Who would grant you such an honor?”

Beatrice: “There’s no other woman out there who would be driven as mad with jealousy as you. But it doesn’t matter, since Betty has long been Subaru’s closest confidante. Betty is Subaru’s.”

Beatrice refused to flinch under Sirius’s cruel words.

Madwoman and spirit glared at each other, until Sirius turned away, breaking the interaction.

Sirius: “Now, I can only entrust him to you. After all, I have to prioritize the Gospel’s instructions. Yes, there is no other way. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You know I want nothing but to return to you as soon as possible.”

At this moment, Sirius still acted mad in love with Subaru. The madwoman left the bloodstained square.

Quite unexpectedly, Beatrice did not give chase. She understood that refusing to allow her to escape would merely result in more sacrifices.

Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

With fluttering eyes, yellow bubbles burst from Subaru’s mouth.

Beatrice pressed her palm against his wound, attempting to stop the flow of

blood. The wound was too deadly, any slip in concentration would lead to Subaru's death.

For Beatrice, saving Subaru was, naturally, her greatest priority. Although, there was another priority Beatrice had to follow.

Subaru: "If you don't treat the other injured people..."

However, the number of wounded people rolling around the square was over thirty.

They had all suffered the same injury as Subaru, and in a cruel twist, the healing being performed on Subaru hadn't reached them. She would need to heal every injury individually.

That was the burden Beatrice needed to take up. But, even if she exhausted her store of mana, she wouldn't be able to bear it.

Beatrice: "—Subaru, compared to..."

Desperately trying to heal Subaru's injury, determined to keep a strong facade, Beatrice spoke with a hoarse voice.

A stream of tears flowed down her white cheeks.

Beatrice: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

Beatrice voiced a string of constant apologies.

Even though she knew her voice could not reach Subaru, rendered unconscious by pain.

Even if she knew that she could solve nothing.

Beatrice: "I'm sorry, Emilia."

Sirius had created so many victims and left the plaza.

Regulus had taken Emilia with his overwhelming power.

— The two Sin Archbishops strode into the city of Pristella.

Chapter 27: Noise

A piercing sound.

Abrupt, vibrating, heavy, empty, distant, nearby.

The flow of his blood dulled, as if his blood vessels were infected by an inflow of sludge, his organs were sluggish, as if filled with clay, and oxygen didn't reach his brain, leaving his thoughts foggy and unreliable.

The vibration was in his nearby vicinity, the sound shaking the membrane of his skull, travelling through his bones to his hands and feet.

The darkness he'd become used to faded for a sudden white light, which his eyes were unable to accept. In that white light, forms and shapes moved about, as if children had cast paint everywhere in a room of white.

The heavy sound faded, and, as his eyes moved under their lids, his body had entirely burned out. Accompanied by nausea and sluggishness, Subaru slowly opened his eyes.

Everything became distant as he entered a calm world, and, after tens of seconds, his eyes were restored to their original state, as darkened rooms and dirty ceilings opened. He felt the breaths of many bodies moving around and keeping busy in his surroundings. People moving around in order to keep the surroundings busy, and their bodies.

???: “Hey, bro, you’re awake!”

Ears ringing with tinnitus, Subaru, attacked by a sudden sound with an unnecessary amount of strength, focused on it.

???: “Cat-eared young lady, over here! Everyone else, keep working! Sorry, but keep working! We’re fighting against time!”

???: “Really nyow, you’re annoying. People need quiet here, so quickly get back to work.”

With a bow of his head, the large beastman apologized for his loud voice as he was approached by an angry young woman, no, young man.

Wearing a revealing dress, a bloodstained Ferris looked at Subaru with a sigh of relief.

Ferris: “Now that you’ve woken up, do you understand the situation... actually, can you speak right now?”

Subaru: “... Ah, Ferris?”

Ferris: “Yep, it’s everyone’s favorite Ferri-chan. You’re Natsuki Subaru, and we’re at a field hospital right nyow since you were heavily injured, got it?”

Ferris quickly explained the situation to a hoarse Subaru. Reluctantly, his brain digested his speech word by word.

Looking around, Subaru identified his surroundings. At last, he noticed that he was lying on a simple bed made of pieces of cloth.

Then, as Ferris said, this looked like a field hospital.

Everyone, people lay writhing in pain, awaiting treatment like Subaru's.

The taste of blood, a miserable, whispered cry. Just healing magic couldn't keep up, and needles and sutures were introduced to wounds.

Subaru: "What... exactly is happening?"

Ferris: "Looks chaotic, doesn't it? Slowly, try to remember what happened before you fainted. If you recall that, you'll find the answer."

Ferris's words weren't gentle, but that wasn't a matter of his mood. Rather, he had no energy to spare for gentleness. His sleeves were rolled up, and his white skin and face were stained with blood.

Imagining the volume of work that Ferris, a first-rate healer, would need to take on in the face of this tragedy wasn't difficult. And, the cause of this tragedy was—

Subaru: "The Witch Cult..."

Ferris: "Really, those guys are the worst. My understanding of them was too naive... I never expected them to pull something like this. Of course, nyo one

else was expecting this either.”

Remorsefully biting his lips. Ferris lowered his chin at Subaru.

The regret in Ferris was clear. Although Subaru understood that, there were other uncertainties.

Subaru: “E-Emilia!? Where is Emilia? Is she here?”

Ferris: “.....”

Subaru: “That bastard, Greed... the archbishop took Emilia. Then, I...”

He quiver, coming to understand the cause of his restlessness.

In Ferris’s lowered gaze and silence, Subaru found a clear answer.

At least, Emilia wasn’t here.

Then if his impression before passing out was right, she’d been taken by Regulus.

Subaru: “And Beatrice? The little girl who was with me? She has an arrogant, lovable face, and curly hair... Beatrice?”

Emilia had more than likely been abducted by Regulus.

Judging from Regulus's attitude, the likelihood that he would hurt Emilia, although uncertain, should be low. Although he couldn't be forgiven, that was the case.

But what had happened to Beatrice? Sirius and Regulus had both been present, and Sirius had held a strong hostility toward Beatrice.

Since Subaru had been safely carried into the field hospital, they escaped from Sirius.

So who had protected Subaru?

Subaru: "Hey, please. Tell me. Beatrice..."

Ferris: "——"

Not finding an answer to his unease, Subaru desperately sought an answer from Ferris, who closed his eyes. The giant beastman standing next to him, Ricardo, the head of the [Iron Fang], looked to the side.

Subaru followed his gaze.

Subaru: "Beatrice."

Lying a ways from the people receiving treatment was a lone maiden in a

dress.

Seeing her sleeping in a makeshift bed like his own. Subaru went to lift the towel covering his stomach and run to her.

However, halfway to his feet, severe pain crippled him. On top of that, his right foot stopped obeying him, and the system of his body broke down.

His head was heavy with fatigue, and his right foot couldn't understand why it was unable to move.

Hurrying to take a look, the horror of his own foot left Subaru speechless.

Subaru: "Oh..."

Ferris: "Subaru-kyun would have lost a foot without Beatrice's healing. You'll have to thank that child later."

Subaru's right foot was missing about half of its flesh, and was obviously a different size from his left foot. It was also wrapped in several layers of thick bandages, and a board had been fixed to his heel. All those had caused him to lose his balance.

He couldn't help but brush it with his fingers, and, in that moment, a bolt of realization struck him.

Subaru: "I remember...!"

Regulus's last blow before he'd left.

He'd taken Emilia, said some nonsense, and kicked the ground up as easily as he could kick sand, and the soil had struck Subaru's food.

At that moment, Subaru's right foot had been wounded as if it had been mauled by a wild animal's claws. And that had resulted in the present state of Subaru's right foot.

Ricardo: "When I stumbled upon the scene, your foot was only connected by a few tendons. A crying little miss had been desperately healing it until we got you help."

Ferris: "After that, Subaru was carried here and treated by Ferri-chan. Although Ferri-chan's treatment can't guarantee that your foot will be the same as before, nyow the bones and nerves are linked, and the flesh is regenerating, so don't do anything to upset it."

Crossing his wrists, Ferris made an X, prepared to deal with Subaru's reluctance, however, Subaru obeyed in silence, his attention more focused on Beatrice's bed.

As Ferris sighed in relief, a large hand supported Subaru's shoulder, allowing him to slowly make his way to Beatrice.

Ricardo: "As for getting you to that little miss, I can handle that."

Subaru: “Thanks, sorry about this.”

Ricardo: “No worries.”

Ricardo moved Subaru’s entire bed near Beatrice’s. From there, Subaru leaned forward to take a better look at her. The little girl was sleeping so quietly that Subaru couldn’t even hear her breathing.

Even though she was a spirit, Beatrice slept like a human. Unlike Puck, she couldn’t dematerialize, so this was how she reduced the burden of materialization on her mana.

For this reason, seeing Beatrice’s sleeping face was hardly uncommon for Subaru. Only, this was the first time he’d seen her sleeping so quietly. Subaru: “She’s, just sleeping... right? Still, I’m worried...”

Ferris: “Asleep isn’t the right word. Right now, she’s lost her function as a spirit... A state of suspended animation might be closer.”

Subaru: “Suspended animation? Why...!?”

Touching Beatrice’s forehead, he was surprised to find how low her temperature was. Brushing her eyelashes and her face yielded no reaction, just as Ferris had reported. In response to the look on Subaru’s face, Ricardo squatted down.

Ricardo: “According to the cat-eared lady, this happened as the result of

mana overuse, which indeed seems to be the case. I found the square you were in completely by accident, bro. Everyone there had almost the same injury, which the little miss was taking care of on her own.”

Subaru: “——”

Ricardo spoke with a sigh, leaving Subaru silent for a while.

The same wound as Subaru — that was the result of the a bond transmitting the injury Subaru had gotten from Regulus Subaru attacking the feet of Regulus. Sirius certainly had complicated matters. The madwoman seemed to have left the scene, and Beatrice's fight had begun there.

She'd given equally thorough treatment to Subaru and everyone else who was wounded.

Of course, Subaru was a greedy man who asked for too much, and the child who accompanied that Subaru also refused to give up anyone.

So Beatrice had squeezed every last drop of her mana dry to save all those people, at this heavy price.

Subaru: “Beatrice is fine, right...? She just needs a little rest...”

Ferris: “... To be honest, I'm nyot too optimistic. Ferri-chan is a first rate healer, but doesn't know much about spirits. And this child isn't an ordinary spirit either. So I don't really knyow any real solutions.”

Subaru: “There... there has to be a way! If Beatrice can’t be saved, I...”

It had only been a year.

He had freed her from the archive in order to bring her happiness, and her life couldn’t end here.

Happiness, happiness, happiness, no one deserves happiness more than this child. than anyone should be happy child is not it.

Ricardo: “If she needs magic to be brought back, can’t she take some from another source? If bro is her contractor, than she should be able to get some from him, right?”

Ferris: “... Obviously, Subaru would easily be the source, but that idiot fractured his gate, so she can’t use his mana.”

Subaru: “Right, bocca fruits. With bocca fruits, I can restore my own mana, and from there I can give some to Beatrice...!”

Ferris: “Idiot!”

Ferris snapped angrily as he glared at the desperate Subaru.

Subaru was surprised at that unexpectedly sharp reprimand, and Ferris immediately put on a fiddling, shy demeanor.

Ferris: “How many times have I said this? That’s really dangerous for Subaru-kyun’s body. In fact, it would be like poison. If you did that, we’d just end up with two casualties... so you can’t.”

Subaru: “.....”

Ferris’s strict words were tinged with sadness. Reading that sincere thought, Subaru closed his mouth and swallowed his reckless judgments.

Ferris was an expert in healing, so he had of course considered a myriad of ways to help Beatrice.

Subaru’s sudden thought must have already been considered.

Ferris: “I can understand Subaru’s worry about Beatrice-chan. And although I understand, there’s nyothing we can do for her right nyow. There are many other things that we have to worry about than just that child...”

Subaru: “Beatrice. . . Right, there's Emilia too...” Ferris’s words brought Subaru back to reality.

He turned his attention to the field hospital — and found that something was off. There were people with wounded right feet, the same injury as Subaru, but there were also plenty of people with different injuries.

Subaru: “How’s the situation? ... No, what else has happened? What’s with all

the injuries?”

Ricardo: “The Witch Cult is here like you said, bro.”

Subaru: “But it can’t just be them, right? I only saw two archbishops. This level of harm can’t be enacted by just two people. In other words, they’ve brought the fodder cultists too.”

The two archbishops were ridiculously powerful.

So Subaru had simply assumed that they would be the only cultists present — but it was only natural that, as Petelgeuse did, they had brought underlings to the city as well.

That was the only explanation for such damage.

Subaru: “The two archbishops and the cultists under them, are they attacking the city right now?”

Ferris: “On this matter, there are a variety of...”

Ferris’s voice was bitter as he began to answer Subaru’s conclusion.

However, before she could confirm or deny it, an unexpected interruption came.

That was,

???: “Yahoo, yahoo, yahoo!”

The space rang with the sound of a high pitched voice.

The voice’s relaxed tone contrasted sharply with the somber atmosphere, as if someone had accidentally tuned a TV channel of an entertainment program, during a serious conversation.

Subaru: “Wh-what?”

Hearing the sound, Subaru looked around wildly, and, unable to find the owner, he immediately realized its the source.

Subaru’s immediate impression of the sudden voice was that it sounded like it had come from a loudspeaker or radio, a thought that mirrored one he’d had this morning.

Subaru: “The city’s radio broadcast magic?”

???: “Hello, all you meat creatures! No matter how many times you’ve heard it, doesn’t my beauty and my lovely voice excite you? Gahahahaha!”

As if verifying Subaru’s idea, the voice appeared again, amplified by a magic speaker.

That voice rang with a childlike cruelty, like a girl who'd spurned etiquette and trampled on conventional manners of speech.

Her sharp laughter seemed able to pierce right into your mind, causing an aversion both mental and physical.

Subaru: "What, a stupid voice, this is..."

Ferris: "Hush, Subaru, quiet."

Ferris straightened his ear with one finger and put another over her mouth.

A serious Ferris seemed to be completely absorbed, and Ricardo wore a vigilant expression. The bedridden injured all clapped their hands over their ears.

This didn't seem to be the first time they'd heard it.

???: "Alright, you meat creatures enthralled by a beautiful girl's enticing voice, I have news for

you: we're all tired, so we're going home now. Just kidding! The true tossing and turning of day and night starts now! Gahahahaha!"

A harsh, harsh voice, like a mirror next to the ear being scratched with sharp claws, filled with sadistic glee. What, what, what was this voice, what was this woman?

Forehead dripping with cold sweat, Subaru was well aware of his body's abnormal condition.

As Subaru's mind turned, his body had been captured.

???: "Setting aside my funny, laugh-inducing joke, let's continue with the news. As I said just now, the city has been occupied by us. You're all caged birds... no, you're all insects in a cage for insects."

Subaru: "——!?"

???: "Insects are just bugs, and the owner of that cage gets to decide just what to do with you. Wings and head, prepare to have them removed... Kahahaha, how ugly, how awful! What a merciless life. You should be thankful for being left in my tender care. Gahahahaha!"

A repeated, malicious laugh.

One which belonged to a presence which despised others and found vicious delight in ravaging their joy.

Subaru knew this kind of presence better than anybody.

???: "Wait, wait, you idiots can't understand the real meaning of my precious words. Poor incompetent fools, only thinking about slabs of meat in their free time. My gentle, loving self will make this easier to understand. I'll tell you with my spit which you masochists love."

Subaru: “——”

???: “Insects in a cage can’t do anything about their owner’s mood. The most you can do to please us is to lie fearfully in your cage. When we’re in a bad mood, you can only tremble in fear as we tear your wings or legs off. When I bring you honey, I’ll be like your mother, gently stroking you heads. There~fore~, kahahahahaha!”

In the face of that constant viciousness, Subaru imitated Ferris and listened silently.

A breath, a word, muddy feelings in his chest stifled, Subaru sealed his will with iron.

And then, he noticed. He noticed it.

What, was that?

???: “Later, we’ll have more to ask of you scum. You’ll wear desperately ugly expressions, cry that you don’t want to die don’t want to die don’t want to die and think of ways to emerge from the crowd and give us answers. In that case, my moving kindness might have me consider setting down the cage in my hand. Gah— isn’t that really easy to understand! Gahahaha!”

With excitement, the speaker clapped, stomping her feet from her seat.

Her speech, her attitude, her voice, Subaru found them all unbearably

irritating— but that wasn't the problem at hand.

From the beginning, he could hear that sound.

He had thought that it had come from being in the same room as that magic device. Faintly accompanying that woman's voice was a sound that Subaru had certainly caught.

However, he was unsure of what exactly that sound was.

What was still worse was that he had almost, but not quite, reached the answer.

Unknowing, unaware, unwitting.

A noisy heartbeat, the noisy flow of his blood. Reject and understand, reject and understand.

— A very faint buzzing sound, like the flapping of a myriad of wings.

He was very close, infinitely near the right solution. Although close, he wasn't quite there.

A plume of flapping feathers, that was the noise that seemed to be mixed into the broadcast. Many magical phenomena were unclear to Subaru. So perhaps this was just his imagination. But Subaru's common sense felt that something was off.

That sense of violation and that plume of feathers stuck in Subaru's mind.

???: "And, the end. My precious words end here. Metamorphosing meat creatures and insects should work their hardest. Like I said before... we've taken control of the four towers that

operate the waterways. I think it's best to not try anything weird? A drowned man's dead face is unbearable ugly! Gahahahaha—"

That cruel high-pitched laughter was interrupted as the sound faded.

That sound of wings was gone as well. Subaru could finally disengage his body, and he immediately flew over to Ferris and Ricardo.

Subaru: "What did you think of the broadcast just now?"

Ferris: "What I think of it... Our limbs were mercilessly taken, and we've been reduced to just a head, that's how Ferri-chan sees this."

A bitter Ferris bit his fingers and replied to a frowning Subaru.

Various places had become stages, for the purpose of being seized by the enemy.

Subaru: "So just now, that was the Witch Cult..."

Ferris: “The first broadcast came when Subaru-kyun was sleeping. In it, the broadcaster introduced herself...”

Ferris paused, looking unsure of whether or not he should continue.

Subaru, ignorant of the reason for his hesitation, tilted his head.

In the Witch Cult, the common practice among archbishops was to first announce their sin. After that came their name.

The Sin Archbishop of Lust, the third archbishop that Subaru hadn’t imagined would be present.

Her name was,

Ferris: “Although this is disgusting, and Ferri-chan doesn’t believe it in the slightest, this is the name that was given.”

Ferris said so, rendering the credibility of the testimony he was about to repeat very low.

Ferris: “Capella Emerada Lugunica. —Although it couldn’t be, it’s a nyame of royalty.”

Chapter 28: A Meeting Covered in Wounds

Subaru: “Wait, let’s calm down. First, can we sort through what we know?”

Ferris’s words had pushed the limit of what Subaru could handle right now.

Ferris and Ricardo nodded at Subaru’s raised hand as they considered the new information that had been broadcasted.

Subaru: “Moving anywhere... will be pretty difficult with so many injured.”

Ferris: “Well, the most severe wounds have already been stabilized, and there shouldn’t be any more people showing up, but still.”

With a sense of professionalism, Ferris gave his diagnosis. Subaru took a moment to examine the conditions of the field hospital.

Minimal lighting, and a ground of cold stone making ground. From the unique feel of its air, Subaru judged the place to be underground — almost like the parking lot of a large department store.

Subaru: “Are we still in Pristella?”

Ferris: “It’s one of Pristella’s shelters. The broadcast this morning mentioned it, remember? In Pristella, if an issue with the waterways ever occurred, the water damage would be troublesome, so there are shelters all over the city.

This is one of the shelters on First Street.”

Ricardo: “The square where I found bro is close to here. After a rough start, we managed to bring bro and the other refugees to safety!”

Following Ferris, Ricardo gave his proclamation as he pounded loudly on his thick breastplate.

Ferris glared intently at Ricardo, who took several moments to stop.

Ferris: “It’s lucky that Ferri-chan was also here, with so many people wounded. This dog-faced mister wouldn’t have been able to handle any of the treatment.”

Ricardo: “Yep! Now I don’t need to have any regrets! Hahaha!”

Ricardo’s usual attitude and his laugh were refreshing, even if they were out of place for this somber hospital. If one person kept a positive attitude, everyone could maintain hope.

Ferris: “So, what happened to Subaru-kyun?”

Subaru: “Ah, right. There were two archbishops in the square, Greed and Wrath. The one who destroyed my foot was Greed, who abducted Emilia... however, the one who caused the injury on everyone else was Wrath.”

Ferris: “How did that happen?”

Subaru: “The authority of Wrath is... It’s a little difficult to explain, but if anyone is injured, she has the power to transmit the injury to other people.”

He chose his words carefully, attempting to give a simple explanation of her power. Ricardo had his head tilted, and Ferris’s complexion changed as he realized the implications of her ability.

He looked to the wounded and looked at the strap of the right foot.

Ferris: “So... that’s the reason why Subaru-kyun and everyone else had such a similar injury. I had a bad feeling already, but...”

Subaru: “Ah...”

Absurd emotions often accompanied a distorted character. However, with Sirius, this absurdity was also physiological in nature.

Subaru had still more to say.

Subaru: “And Greed’s also very troublesome.”

Ferris: “Ah~... Ferri-chan’s already tired as is, I don’t have the energy to hear about more troublesome things.”

Subaru: “Sorry, I don’t think that’s possible. —That damned Greed, he can invalidate any attack. Whether being bathed in fire, hit by a whip, or directly punched, all damage is null.”

The unconscious Emilia, in Regulus's arms, was defenseless. Even bathed in Sirius's flames, Regulus had flawlessly defended both himself and Emilia. That had resulted in a display of his unmanageable power.

This would prove to be an incredibly tiresome situation.

Ferris: "A guy who can pass on injuries, and a guy who's invincible... Ah, you have to be kidding me."

Subaru: "That other archbishop... Petelgeuse's Unseen Hand was quite powerful, but this guy's on a completely different level."

That said, Petelgeuse's ability had ended up not being effective on Subaru. Considering that ineffectiveness, Subaru had thought of him as a simple lunatic rather than a Sin Archbishop.

Thus, this would be his first formal battle with the Witch Cult.

Subaru: "And the archbishop who just introduced herself, Lust... her abilities are probably just as troublesome."

Ferris: "Worst of all... There are probably five archbishops here."

Subaru: "Five...!?"

Ferris uttered a hypothesis which was terrifying beyond Subaru's wildest imagination.

What had happened, to give him such an idea?

Ferris sighed and straightened his finger at the subdued Subaru.

Ferris: "Listen. Think of the broadcast, of what Lust said. This city has four water gates, right?"

Subaru: "Ah, right, they'd seized them, which means that they could be planning to sink the city... so, that's a very dangerous situation...."

Ferris: "And there's the possibility of an archbishop occupying each... Already, there are three archbishops gathered in one place, which is completely unprecedented. So the worst of worst situation comes to mind... there are even more archbishops here."

Subaru: "Four... tch."

Speaking the number out loud, Subaru finally understood what Ferris wanted to say.

There were four water gates, north, south, east, and west, which ran the city of Pristella. Occupying all of them implied,

Subaru: "So it could be that each tower has an archbishop guarding it? In that case, that should make four archbishops..."

Ferris: “Subaru-kyun, consider what just happened. —The broadcast just now used a magic which only exists in the City Hall. The enemy must also occupy the central hub of the city, meaning that they’ve captured five strongholds.”

Subaru: “—hk”

That even more hopeless speculation left Subaru breathless.

Like Ferris said, the City Hall must have been taken to give that broadcast. In addition to Lust, who occupied it, there must be two other archbishops.

The only fathomable explanation for that would be a coordinated attack from the Witch Cult.

Subaru: “Aside from the square I was in, has there been any other commotion? Have there been any other attacks?”

Ferris: “——”

If this were an offense by the Witch Cult, it would be difficult to imagine that they would only target a single location. Subaru could only pray that his worst fears of Casualties wouldn’t become a reality.

Absentmindedly, Ferris cast his gaze downward, falling silent. Ricardo gave a cough, a set of sharp teeth visible on the beastman’s large face.

Ricardo: “Honestly, the only situation we know is our own. We don’t even know where the other shelters are, so it’s in our best interest to stay here.”

Subaru: “Why? Shouldn’t we look for our allies so that we can collaborate? Aren’t you worried about them... that’s right!”

As he spoke, Ricardo gestured with his hands, and Subaru hurriedly looked up at Ferris.

In this shelter of wounded people, it was odd that Ferris and Ricardo were the only people Subaru knew. Especially when Ferris was here.

Subaru: “Where are Crusch-san and Wilhelm-san? It’s unusual for you three to be separated. Are they in another shelter?”

Ferris: “...You’re asking a difficult question, Subaru-kyun. The only ones you know here are Ferri-chan and the mister, and as you can see—”

Ferris replied with a sense of unease, and Subaru felt a deep anxiety rise within himself. Then, a gentle voice relieved that intense atmosphere.

Suddenly hearing that voice, Subaru looked up and around, unable to locate its owner.

???: “I’m sorry. I seem to have been worrying you, Ferris-chan. It’s good to see you, Subaru-sama.”

Ferris: “Crusch-sama is is such a meanie.”

Subaru: “Wha? Huh?”

Ferris, who was conversing with his invisible master, reached into his dress. Subaru watched with round eyes as he pulled out a familiar object.

Subaru: “Wait, this is...”

Ferris: “That’s right. It’s loot from a year ago. We used them too, remember?”

Ferris replied, revealing a hand mirror in his grip.

At first glance, the mirror lacked any defining characteristic, but rather than show a reflection, its face reflected a green-haired beauty with a gentle face — without a doubt, that was Crusch.

The magic device known as a Conversation Mirror was more or less this world’s version of a cell phone, which lets its owners speak through paired mirrors. A year ago, they had played a role in the battle with the Witch Cult, and they had been brought to this city as well.

Crusch, opposite the mirror, frowned slightly before the silent Subaru.

Crusch: “Ferris. Subaru-sama seems a little troubled. Did you hide this from him? ”

Ferris: “Syorry about that. But, but, I didn’t think our next call would be so soon, so I didn’t think it was that important to tell him yet.”

Subaru: “W-Wait. Give me a moment. Thanks to the Conversation Mirrors, you’re in contact with Crusch, who’s at another shelter, is that right?”

Crusch: “Indeed.”

As master and knight talked, Subaru took a moment to sort through his confusion.

The Conversation Mirror explained Ferris’s calmness about his missing master.

Tentatively, to confirm Crusch’s safety with his own eyes, Subaru took the mirror from Ferris.

Subaru: “Thank goodness... is difficult to say right now with what’s happening, but we’re lucky that we could get in touch. Crusch-san, are you hurt at all?”

Crusch: “No, thanks for your concern. Fortunately, I manage to find a shelter in time, without suffering any injury. I heard that Subaru-sama received a serious wound and had to be carried in. How are you doing?”

Subaru: “I can’t say anything like, ‘I’m completely fine’, but it’s good enough. I’ll do something. I’ll move as soon as the wound is bandaged... Ferris, don’t look at me like that.”

As Subaru announced his intent, he felt Ferris's harsh glare stabbing into him. However, although he was being ungrateful, Subaru couldn't sit by and do nothing. Breaking the deadlock they were in was of the utmost urgency.

He couldn't lie around obediently, waiting for conditions to deteriorate.

Subaru: "We'll talk about this later... Crusch-san, how's the situation in your shelter? Did anyone else make it there?"

Crusch: "Yes. There are several others with me..."

Julius: "I'm also here, Subaru. Fortunately, everyone who was in the hotel made it here."

From somewhere behind Crusch, an elegant voice joined the conversation.

The moment he heard it, Subaru froze briefly before giving a sharp shake of his head. He didn't want to be a fool who didn't realize how encouraging that voice was.

Subaru: "Your presence there is kinda reassuring, Julius."

Julius: "I heard you ended up being carried into your shelter, unconscious. Since you've climbed back up with your usual liveliness, it seems that my worries were baseless... Is it true that Emilia-sama was abducted?"

Subaru: "...It's true. Sorry. I'm so useless."

Julius: “You were facing two archbishops. I’m not so awful a man as to blame you for a lack of strength. Anastasia-sama and Crusch-sama are both here, as well as a few members of the Iron Fang. Ah, two of Felt-sama’s followers are here too.”

He quickly confirmed Emilia’s status, without holding Subaru accountable.

Although the kindness from the other side of the mirror was touching, it amplified Subaru’s feelings of guilt. While listening to his words, Subaru confirmed the presence of a wounded man in the refuge.

Subaru: “Right, you should tell Felt’s guys that their friend is here. He’s wounded, but alive.”

Julius: “I see, that’s good to hear. I’ll be sure to pass it on. They’re trying to act brave, but they’re obviously worried. —Well then, Subaru.”

After Ton and Kan had been informed of Larkins’s safety, Julius lowered his voice, changing the atmosphere of their conversation.

Julius: “What do we do?”

Subaru: “...I haven’t a clue why you’re asking me that.”

Julius: “As Sloth had shown, you seem to have a knack for dealing with the Witch Cult. Maybe you could pull something unexpected and solve this

dilemma?”

Subaru: “What kind of nonsense is that? Sorry to disappoint, but I’m not some kind of Witch Cult expert.”

Julius: “That's regrettable. Now, about Emilia-sama. There is no doubt that your heart is the most anxious. What do you want to do?”

Subaru’s reply obviously hadn’t answered Julius’s expectations, but he wasn’t discouraged. He understood that thinking of Subaru as some miraculous archbishop slayer would be too much to look for.

Rather, the latter half of his sentence held his true question.

Subaru: “...Emilia was taken by Greed. He only spouts his own selfish beliefs and doesn’t accept any disagreements. I don’t want to leave Emilia with him for even a second.”

Julius: “That is to say, to rescue Emilia from Greed is your responsibility.”

Subaru: “Of course... did you just say responsibility?”

Julius spoke in a subdued tone as he showed Subaru an open palm, with five fingers outstretched.

Julius: “Listen, Subaru. Ferris should have clarified that there are likely five archbishops at each of Pristella’s key sites. Taking into account the status of each enemy, the division of the battle is a very important issue.”

Subaru: "... No matter from where, they can sink the Watergate City."

Julius: "That's right. The condition for defeating the archbishops is to attack each of those places at the same time. In the meantime, we have to reestablish contact our forces, who are scattered across the city... you understand our situation, right?"

Although unable to get in touch with comrades in various places, Julius had put forth a plan of coordinated attack. Originally, the magic of the city was responsible for maintaining contact with those places.

However, when the city hall had fallen, everyone had been separated and had sought refuge in different shelters. In order to judge the state of the others shelters, action needed to be taken.

Ferris: "By the way, Wil-jii confirmed that there's a mob wandering the city. They seem to have lost their senses and are acting like cultists."

Subaru: "...That would be that bastard Sirius's authority... Damn, this is looking more and more desperate by the second."

Hearing Ferris's annoying piece of information, Subaru scratched his face in agitation as more bad news came to light. At the very least, there must be a way of getting in touch with all the existing combat forces—

Subaru: "I don't know where Otto and Garfiel are, and Emilia's been kidnapped by Greed. What a mess..."

Julius: "Joshua and Deputy Chief of the Iron Fang are both missing, as are Wilhelm-sama, Felt-sama, and Reinhard. Priscilla-sama, too..."

Subaru: "I don't know where Al and that garbage man are, but Priscilla should have been in the city park before the commotion started. I don't know what happened to her after that... damn it, Liliana should be with her too."

Priscilla wasn't normal in any sense of the word, and Liliana was also honestly very strange.

Subaru didn't want either of them to be hurt.

Taking into account Priscilla's proclaimed luck and that Songstress's character, Subaru could only hope that they would be fine.

Patrasche had also been in the Water Plumage Pavilion. She was smart enough to avoid attention, so worrying about her would be needless.

Constant sources of worry plagued Subaru, and he felt that launching five simultaneous attacks was outside of the realm of possibility.

No matter how it was said, it would be impossible. There weren't enough combatants to attack five locations, not to mention that they would be facing archbishops. The only thing most people could bring to such a fight was hope.

Subaru: "... Wait. Why do we have to go after all give places at the same time?"

Julius: “What do you mean? It’s as we’ve already said. The Witch Cult can do tremendous damage from anywhere they occupy. Seizing one place would leave them with the rest...”

Subaru: “It’s not like that though, right? I understand that we need to seize all four towers eventually. But why at the same time?”

Julius: “Once they discover that they’ve been sabotaged in one location, it’s a matter of course that the other archbishops would commence with their plans, no? That must be why they launched such a coordinated attack.”

Julius gave a clear response to Subaru’s doubts.

While listening to his words, Subaru pondered their accuracy. Of course, Julius’s logic was clear and sound. But the opponents they faced weren’t normal ones.

In that square, Regulus and Sirius had fought lethally.

Regulus hadn’t been serious, and so he hadn’t done much harm, but Sirius had definitely been intending to kill him. Regulus should have been able to defeat her in minutes.

Those guys, could they really have worked together to capture the city?

Subaru: “... Do they have any real sense of cooperation. Of course, they said

that they'd collaborated to seize the watergates, but can they keep in organized contact every step of the way? That's what I'm thinking."

Julius: "On what basis?"

Subaru: "In the square I was at, two of the archbishops were trying to kill each other. They only stopped because they were given new instructions from the Gospel. If they hadn't, one would probably have killed the other."

Julius: "So they can't coordinate properly...?"

Julius still appeared faintly uncertain at Subaru's reply. Subaru understood his concern, however.

Subaru: "Is there anyone with access to the outside?"

Julius: "A couple members of the Iron Fang are scouting with an eye on the towers... what are you thinking?"

Subaru: "Although this could just be conjecture, isn't the simplest way of communication just casting magic signals in the air? In such a complex city, verbal communications is troublesome. At the very least, it would take a long time without a Conversation Mirror."

Julius: "The likelihood that the Witch Cult brought any such mirrors is low. My spirits would doubtlessly have detected them already. —Right, that's it."

They reached the same conclusions simultaneously.

Subaru spoke first with an “ah”.

Subaru: “So they routinely make easily understood communications. If some type of commotion doesn’t arise, or they fail to notice it, they don’t act. And so, that reduces our need to disperse our combat forces.”

Julius: “... The only problem with this proposal is that one place is different from all the others.”

Subaru: “—The City Hall. The building that can inform the other towers of the attack. So we’d have to start with that one.”

The initial concentration of combat would be focused on the city’s central office. They would have to go there and defeat the Archbishop of Lust with their current force, and destroy the other towers one by one afterward.

Even then, it would be a test of speed, but the risk would be much lower than that of attacking all five locations at once. Subaru thought so, believed so.

Julius: “——”

On the other side of the mirror, Julius fell into a thoughtful silence.

Subaru’s proposal was based on the poor relationship between Regulus and Sirius, optimistically

assuming that The Witch Cult was a Mess of Messes.

Of course, if the gospel had given a command like Kill Everyone in Pristella, that hope would be fundamentally subverted.

If he'd known this was going to happen, he should have attempted to ask for the content of the Gospel back then—

???: “—My deepest apologies for being late, can everyone hear me?”

In the middle of a heavy silence, another voice suddenly joined the conversation.

The weather-beaten, aged voice which Subaru so looked up to was more reliable than anything else in the present situation.

The face of a white-haired old man was reflected in the Conversation Mirror.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san! You're okay!”

Ferris: “Wil-jii! Thank goodness. You didn't get in touch, it made people worry!”

Ferris also heard a familiar voice. At their welcome, Wilhelm opened his eyes and nodded.

Wilhelm: “My apologies, I was caught up in some trouble and couldn’t find a calm place. Now, finally, some citizens and I have arrived at a shelter. Subaru-dono and Ferris, seeing your safety gives me peace. And Crusch-sama?”

Crusch: “I’m fine. Wilhelm, I’m so glad you’re safe.”

Wilhelm: “Don’t worry about me... it was due to my powerlessness that I wasn’t at your side in this situation. Please allow me to trouble you to wait quietly. I will find you.”

Subaru: “Amazing, this feeling of relief isn’t normal...”

As Crusch and Wilhelm spoke through the mirror, Subaru, finding that the dialogue between master and subordinate held an overwhelming sense of security, sighed with admiration for Wilhelm.

Then, happy for his safety, Subaru ruminated his conversation with Julius as he attempted to organize a summary for Wilhelm.

However,

???: “There are several things to be said, but this is the most urgent.”

At that moment, Wilhelm vanished from the mirror, replaced by a beastman; a kitten wearing a monocle.

This was the Deputy Chief of the Iron Fang, Tivey, who seemed to have joined forces with Wilhelm. His expression was unusually anxious.

Ricardo: “Hey! If it isn’t Tivey! Your safety is better than than anything else.”

Tivey: “You too, Chief... but, we’re not fine right now. Is my sister with you right now?”

Ricardo: “Mimi? I haven’t seen her, did something happen?”

At Tivey’s feeble voice, Ricardo squinted into the mirror, where someone had replaced Tivey.

Hetaro: “Chief! Sister! Sister was...!”

Ricardo: “Hetaro? Why are you in such a panic?”

The one who had flown into view was Tivey’s identical brother, Hetaro. Flying out with tears is, and Tibi (looks) like the brother of Darkarot. He was usually a mellow youth, but, right now, his face was distorted with grief.

Tears filled his round eyes, and his voice shook as he gazed into the mirror.

Hetaro: “O-Our Divine Protection of Trisection activated, from my sister! H-Her wound was so serious, and sister, she... hk!”

Tivey: “Brother, calm down... It’s like he said. When sister was wounded, the wound also reached me and brother, so...”

Ricardo: “—Understood. Wait there, I’ll find Mimi immediately. Don’t cry, just wait.”

In a voice lower than Subaru had ever heard from him, Ricardo spoke into the mirror.

In that smooth sound, Subaru felt a pressure unlike any he’d felt before, and he stepped back, trembling.

The beastman’s eyes were full of anger, and his open mouth revealed a row of sharp canine teeth. He drew his blade, his large muscles tense.

He almost appeared to be searching for the missing girl in that very moment.

Anastasia: “—Wait, Ricardo. I can’t allow such an arbitrary action.”

The voice which stopped Ricardo from charging out came from another mirror.

Ricardo turned back to face Anastasia, who’d claimed the mirror.

He frowned, lifting his blade at his employer.

Ricardo: “Don’t stop me, lady. I don’t want to kid with you right now.”

Anastasia: “Surely, Ricardo, our long bond would have you realize that I’m not

kidding around. Don't make me say it again. Right now, unauthorized actions cannot be allowed. Even for Mimi's sake."

Ricardo: "ARE YOU ASKING ME TO ABANDON MIMI !!?"

Opening his mouth, the rage expelled from Ricardo's mouth shook the air of the shelter.

That intensity was no laughing matter. Subaru stumbled several steps backward, away from the beast who emanated rage. Ricardo fixed his gaze on Anastasia.

Through the mirror, she met it unflinchingly.

Anastasia: "You should understand, Ricardo. We've entered unforeseen circumstances. You are my most important weapon. I cannot let you leave without permission."

Ricardo: "You dare say this? Who do you think you're talking to, Ana-bo... tch!"

Anastasia: "You, of course. Don't you forget, dog monster."

The two spoke names only old acquaintances would recognize. His skin tingling with electricity, Subaru searched for a place to interject.

He wanted to support Ricardo. But he could also understand Anastasia's

sound opinion.

And he was an outside. Anastasia, someone who wasn't, who held a close relationship with them, chose to prioritize the safety of the city over Mimi.

Subaru realized that there was nothing for him to interrupt. Ricardo, too, should understand.

Subaru: “—”

In this way, time trickled on.

If Ricardo forced his exit, the injured Subaru and non-combatants couldn't stop him. Anastasia, who looked coolly into his eyes from across the magic mirror — only she could do anything.

However, Ricardo suddenly turned his head away from the mirror's gaze.

Subaru: “Wait, Ricardo!”

Anastasia: “—Stop, don't rush to make a conclusion.”

Seeing Ricardo's movement, Anastasia spoke. Ricardo gave a silent response.

He turned back and sniffed at the entrance to the shelter.

Ricardo: “Something's close by. What is this... the scent of blood?”

Subaru: “The scent of blood...?”

Among so many wounds, he seemed to be able to detect a fresh scent.

Alert, Ricardo held his blade to the entrance of the shelter. Subaru and Ferris swallowed, watching Ricardo’s judgment.

????: “—hk!”

Heavy footsteps cast a shadow over the refuge of the shelter.

In that moment, the patients in the shelter, intimidated by the insolence of the intruder, held their collective breath. It was none other that Subaru who broke that silence.

Standing there was a familiar short, blond figure.

Subaru: “Garfiel!?”

A sweaty, panting Garfiel.

Suddenly noticing Subaru, he ran over with a strange wobble in his step. Then, Subaru noticed.

Why Garfiel’s movements were so shaky.

Garfiel: “——”

Everyone was lost for words as Garfiel reached Subaru. There, he bowed his head and sank to his knees, kneeling.

Garfiel: “Sorry, captain... hk! My amazin’ self, is... worthless...! Incompetent... hk!” After saying so, Garfiel raised a pained cry.

Lying in his bloodied arms was the figure of a dying Mimi.

Chapter 29: Gorgeous Tiger

—Half a day before Garfiel had rushed into the shelter,

Mimi: “And then~ Hetaro was on the verge of tears, so Mimi had no choice but to hold his hand. And then Tivey looked lonely, so Mimi had no choice~ So I ended up holding both of their hands~!”

Garfiel: “...ah, ‘s that so?”

Mimi: “Yep, that’s right~. And then, after that~, Missy looked really~ happy!”

Even given that uninterested response, the petite girl walking beside him smiled, not discouraged in the least.

The naive girl had orange hair and round eyes. Garfiel had no idea why she had entangled herself with someone from a hostile faction — this beastman, Mimi.

She had been like this since coming to the city of Pristella. No, looking back, she’d been clinging to Garfiel ever since she’d gone to the Roswaal Mansion as a messenger.

Initially, he had suspected that Mimi had been trying to get a read on Emilia’s strongest retainer, but that hypothesis had been long since dismissed due to Mimi’s behavior. Now, Garfiel had no clue why she’d attached herself to him.

The 'why' was impossible to deduce, and Garfiel could only tilt his head curiously to the side.

—Now, they were walking along Pristella's streets together in the dusk.

Neither had invited the other; rather, Mimi had just followed Garfiel as he'd skulked away from the hotel.

Although he'd hoped to be alone to mediate on his thoughts, Garfiel was too embarrassed to give that excuse to shake her off. Overwhelmed by Mimi's eagerness, he'd fallen into this trite conversation, while trying to sort through his feelings.

Mimi: "Gar~f, your expression is weird~. What happened? Was it something~ fun?"

Garfiel: "If somethin' fun'n happen', wouldn't my amazin' self look happy? My amazin' self don't wanna talk 'bout it, and there's no obligation t'talk 'bout it."

Mimi: "If you keep talking about complicated stuff like obligations, you'll end up like Joshua, yeah? Mimi thinks it's better to relax and enjoy stuff! It's better when Garfiel throws his head back~ laughing like an idiot~."

Garfiel: "You sayin' I look like'n idiot?"

Mimi's exaggerated words really were too exaggerated, and Garfiel bared his teeth open eyes wide open. She gave an "ahh~!" and dashed away. She stopped

a little ways away, giggling as she waited for him to catch up, seemingly having forgotten their previous interaction. Garfiel found it incredulous that she'd accuse him of being the one who laughed like an idiot.

An hour or so ago, before dinner, Garfiel had challenged the Sword Saint Reinhard to a battle.

The strongest in the kingdom — or, as some would say, the strongest in the world, was today's Sword Saint.

Before their actual meeting, Garfiel had heard of his power from Subaru.

Reinhard was a friend, a benefactor, and, in a somewhat complex way, a rival to Subaru.

Encountering him in this unexpected place came as a surprise.

Through their conversations, Subaru revealed that he'd more or less successfully resolved his embarrassment from before. Since that grievance had dissipated, Garfiel felt no particular obligation to sugarcoat anymore.

The title of Strongest held a very special meaning to Garfiel.

To be the strongest. To see becoming the strongest as a goal. To strive to become the strongest.

Garfiel believed that as soon as man was born, his first cry would place that as his lofty goal.

Everyone, no matter who, had once longed and dreamed to be the Strongest as they walked the long road known as Life. Everyone would eventually forget that distant dream. Everyone except Garfiel.

That dream had taken root in his heart, and had been a source of so much of his persistence along the way. To Garfiel, the title of Strongest was a combination of his goal, something he had been granted since birth, and indispensable condition allowing him to guard everything he wanted protect.

Therefore, in front of the man who stood at the apex of strength, Garfiel did not repress his restless teeth and claws.

He had gone to Subaru, and received permission to challenge Reinhard.

The Sword Saint seemed a far cry from the strongest; he gave off the impression of being a gentle, kind man who had no martial prowess.

However, Garfiel knew that the most powerful people were able to hide their own power. Setting aside his own tendency to act up, most strong people didn't look strong as they went through their daily activities. Roswaal and Subaru were like that.

He judged Reinhard to be in the same field as them.

— The contest took place in a gravel-covered hotel courtyard.

Refusing Garfiel's proposal to leave the hotel for the city's fields for fear of the damage to their surroundings, Reinhard had settled for a fight located at a hotel, adding the conditions of Don't

Damage the Courtyard.

That could only be said to be humiliating. Even if he were the strongest man, he was underestimating Garfiel. Immediately wanting to force him to regret that demeaning arrogance, Garfiel had dragged him outside.

The confrontation took place in the courtyard, where Subaru had issued a command marking the start of the match. Garfiel had bared his teeth, thinking only of casting the metal on his wrists at the crimson hero.

Garfiel: “——”

That thought vanished almost instantaneously.

The man before him could move faster than one might blink.

Until that very moment, his gentle atmosphere hadn't fallen away. Now, it dissipated to reveal a sharp blade and finely honed flame.

An ordinary person wouldn't be able to feel how his natural state was razor sharp, as if he were a sword himself.

To a certain extent, if a person knew little about martial arts, that feeling would manifest as a sense of oppression which crushed their lungs.

But that wasn't Garfiel.

Garfiel at least held the strength worthy of the Sword Saint.

Noticing that natural body and even trembling under the pressure to his organs, Garfiel howled away his hesitation as he flew at Reinhard.

Their match wasn't meant to be lethal, and they had agreed to cause no serious injuries— forgetting that agreement, he had aimed at Reinhard's throat with his sharp claws, striving for a decisive blow.

In that moment, before his blow could land, elegantly his body was caught in midair, and Garfiel truly understood the disparity in their strength.

Garfiel: “—I lost.”

After that, despite launching offensive attacks from various angles, Reinhard had still casually evaded all of Garfiel's tactics.

On top of that, Reinhard had avoided them all without even taking a step away from where he'd first stood.

In other words, Garfiel had exhausted all his strength against only Reinhard's upper body.

Having a sudden, heavy blow drill into him, tossing him into the air, Garfiel had declared his own defeat.

The Sword Saint hadn't even drawn a sword, his area of expertise. He'd defeated Garfiel with only his bare fists.

What exactly Reinhard and Subaru had said after that, Garfiel couldn't quite recall.

To be so ingracious or foolhardy as to not accept his loss wasn't an impression that Garfiel had wanted to give. He'd left the hotel with only a few words.

He was unable to sort through his feelings as they were swept into a whirlpool.

Strangled by his the unanswerable emotions, Garfiel had sought an answer alone as he walked the Watergate City— which had led him up to here.

Mimi: “Gar~f! Gar~f! Look! Take a look~! The sunset's completely reflected in the water! It's super~ red! This is awesome~! Amazing! So beautiful~!”

The noisy girl led Garfiel around, pulling on his sleeve, yanking on his hair, settling on his shoulders, and he'd been left with no choice but to follow her.

Thanks to her, he'd accomplished leaving the hotel, but was left with no time alone.

Garfiel: “Oi, from th'very start, y've been so noisy. Can'y settle down a bit,

midget?”

Mimi: “Ahhh... nope~!”

Garfiel: “An immediate answer?!”

She grabbed Garfiel’s wrists, running and spinning. Wrists gripped with an unexpectedly strong traction, Garfiel spun in circles with her.

The idea of extracting his wrist and fleeing at the speed of light had crossed his mind, but he didn’t know if Mimi’s beastman blood would provide her with a means to catch up. Mimi could be able to easily catching up with Garfiel’s escape.

He had to take into consideration how conspicuous he’d look.

Before leaving for Pristella, both Frederica and Ram reminded him repeatedly that troubling Emilia or Subaru because of his own quirkiness would set a bad example. The only one he could trouble was Otto, who was like an older brother used to cleaning up messes.

Garfiel: “Haha.”

Mimi: “Oh~ oh~, what’s wrong, Gar~f? Is there something voxing... vicing... vixing you?”

Garfiel: “Ya mean somethin’ vexin’?”

Mimi: “Yep, vixing! What happened~? Talk about it~, talk about it~!”

He was unable to speak candidly to Mimi and she hit him repeatedly in the side with an, “oi, ooiii”. Considering her petite, oddly sturdy form, Garfiel shook himself out of his daze.

He leaned into the waterway, appreciating the view.

Garfiel: “Ah... ‘s really is a movin’ scene.”

Mimi: “Right? This is awesome ~! Amazing!”

Although Mimi should only be listened to half the time, the reflection of the setting sun in the water was indeed a bright, inspiring scene. The glittering water was stained with white and yellow light, and the sky was covered in an orange sunset.

Having become aware of it, Garfiel sat on the edge of the waterway, watching the sluggish coming and going of sailboats.

Mimi: “Hmm~ hmm~ hmm~”

Taking a seat beside him, Mimi shook her feet happily as she hummed a tune through her nose. Although her character was one which couldn’t be silenced, right now, she was behaving rather well. Grabbing Garfiel’s half-clothed shoulders, she bobbed her head up and down.

Taking a sideways glance at her happy face, he discovered that the color of Mimi's hair matched the orange shade of the sunset exactly. He subconsciously reached out a hand to brush her head, and Mimi seemed to be pleased, leaning into his touch.

Mimi: "Fluffy? Fluffy? Mimi~'s head is often touched by Missy too! She pets it and calls it something like a Healing Idol."

Garfiel: "Ah, really's kinda comfortable. That Healing Idol, or whatever, t'Captain sometimes says stuff like th... 'r somethin'."

Mimi: "Gar~f, do you still feel annoyed?"

Garfiel: "'S 'bout somethin' else now!"

Mimi: "Huh?"

As Mimi tilted her head, her face the very picture of innocence, Garfiel laughed inadvertently.

Relief began to blossom in his chest, washing away the feeling he was someone cheap. A sense of humiliation was replaced by determination.

Garfiel: "...bein the strongest so sudden 's'not possible. My amazin' self is still on th'journey there."

Mimi: "Ohh, so you're climbing the ladder to bein the bestest~!"

Garfiel: “Hey, y’understand pretty well. Yeah, ‘s the proper way t’becoming’ the strongest.”

Mimi raised her first, and Garfiel touched his fingers to the white scar on his forehead in reply.

Although her chattiness was annoying, she had also cheered him up. If he was alone, he would probably still be moping morosely. Mimi’s company had turned out to be quite helpful.

Garfiel: “Oi, midget, while we’re here, how ‘bout we go to a stall n’grab a bite? It’ll be my amazin’ self’s treat.”

Mimi: “Gar~f, look!”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

With that invitation, Garfiel got to his feet, patting down his bottom.

Mimi was still seated by the waterway, and her cry caught Garfiel’s attention as he followed her gaze. Then, he narrowed his eyes.

On the other side of the waterway, the ropes of a sailboat had come undone, leaving the boat stranded as it began to drift down the waterway. It was empty, but the problem didn’t lie there.

Mimi: “Hey, kids!”

Mimi gave a loud warning cry in that direction— where five children playing in another boat were careening toward the drifting boat.

The children didn’t notice the approach of the other boat. If they collided, their boat could end up being overturned, throwing the children into the waterway.

At Mimi’s shout, other people around the waterway had taken notice. One of the boat owners flew toward the children in a panic, but he wouldn’t make it in time.

Hearing the shrill voices of the spectators, the children finally noticed their situation and panicked as they saw the sudden approach of the empty boat.

Then—

Garfiel: “Yo, kids. Thank the midget cat nee-chan who noticed you.”

Mimi: “Gar~f!”

He’d suddenly leapt onto the boat, keeping an astonishing balance as he landed. To the children, the silent Garfiel could only be considered a miracle from heaven.

With a crooked smile and a fiery laugh, the children stiffened, intimidated by the scary blond stranger. As their panic died down, Garfiel scooped the five

children into his arms, making another leap.

They landed on a sidewalk near the waterway as the boats collided violently, capsizing the boat that had been carrying the children.

Garfiel, by cleverly having kept hold of the the ropes connecting the boats, prevented a chain reaction of collisions that would have sank a series of boats.

Restraining the movement of the overturned boat prevented the detached boat from drifting further downstream and minimized the area of effect.

Garfiel: “ight, th’should do it!”

After anchoring the ropes firmly, Garfiel ended his struggle, with an uproar of cheers and applause from the witnesses.

One of the shipowners, who should have been monitoring the condition of the boat, bowed his head to convey his gratitude, which Garfiel waved off, scratching his head and looking shy.

Then,

Kid: “O-Onii-chan. Thank you very much.”

Garfiel: “Ohh?”

The rescued children gathered and poured grateful words upon Garfiel.

They had lost the timid expressions they'd worn on the boat, merely gazing at Garfiel with glittering expressions. As Garfiel met their gazes, their hyperactive clapping hands began to move even faster.

Faced with that, Garfiel felt his mood lighted as he rubbed his nose.

Garfiel: "'S no need for anythin' like that. Happen'd by chance... ah, ya by chance. My

amazin' self was guided here by a wind 'f fate. 's the City of Water, surrounded by waterways... if anyone ended up sheddin' tears, there'd be a flood, yeah?"

The applause began to calm as Garfiel gave his complacent response.

The cheers had also become intermittent. However, unlike the spectators, the children gave dramatic reactions.

Kids: "Wow, amazing!"

"So cool~!"

"For tears, regardless of danger!"

"Never flinching! Never doubting! Never hesitating!"

Garfiel nodded with satisfaction at the excited children.

Then, with an eager gaze, one of them voiced a question.

Kid: “Big brother, what’s your name?”

Garfiel: “It ain’t not worth mentionin’. However, ‘f pressed for it... my amazin’ self’s a tiger. Ya, a gorgeous tiger. GORGEOUS TIGER!!”

Kids: “Gorgeous! TIGER!!”

Garfiel stuck a pose, leaning back with his hands stretched obliquely to the sky.

Eyes shining, the children gave hushed whispers of excitement as they imitated him.

As Garfiel shared his heart with the children surrounding him, Mimi rushed over, her eyes shining as well.

Mimi: “— Gar~f, so cool~!”

She ran over to joined the ranks of the children crowding around Garfiel.

The delighted laughter of the children, Mimi, and Garfiel rang through the

twilit waterways.

—The applause and cheers had long since dissipated, leaving only the solitary shipowner regarding them with a smile.

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Garfiel bounced with energy as he shared snacks with the children at a stall.

Garfiel: “Them, my amazin’ self said, ‘Now, I won’t let ya take even one more step forward, y’inferior scum! ‘S the Captain’s territory, and y’ve already been trapped here!’ Hah!”

Mimi: “Amazing~! So cool~!”

Kid: “Woah! That’s so cool~!”

As Pristella was infiltrated by the glow of sunset, Garfiel shared stories of the past year with Mimi and the kids.

What he’d just described was one of the most impressive events that had happened, the Soil

Spider Hunt.

A nearby village had an outbreak of a witchbeast known as Soil Spiders, and somehow Subaru, Garfiel, and Otto had been caught up in the crusade against them, in a perfect combination of Otto and Subaru's scheming and Garfiel's strength.

One of the rescued children happily listened to Garfiel's recollections. He was a child with blond hair, only around six or seven years old age.

He had lovely features and a cute smiling face that would surely one day attract lovelorn sighs from women. But right now, he was just a child admiring Garfiel's way of living.

After buying the children snacks, Garfiel had taken it upon himself to escort the children safely to their homes, one by one. Four of the five have returned home unharmed, which meant that this boy was the last one.

Garfiel: "With just a small group, ya went out pretty far t'play. Ain't that dangerous?" As they undertook the considerate journey to the child's house, Garfiel frowned.

The children's adventure had taken them to the intersection of First and Second Street, near where the Muse Headquarters was located. As they walked, Garfiel couldn't help thinking they'd wandered too far.

In fact, they'd come all the way from Third Street. Without any detours, the journey would take nearly a full hour to complete.

The child grinned in response.

Kid: “Occasionally, the Songstress goes to the park on First Street. We were looking for her!”

Garfiel: “Uh... ‘s that so? Captain said her singin’s pretty powerful, too, but my amazin’ self's kinda suspicious.”

Rubbing his nose, Garfiel found it difficult to agree with the child’s reply.

Garfiel had only met the Songstress Liliana once, at the Muse Headquarters. Even that brief interaction was enough to have left a significant degree of impact on him. Liliana was, beyond a doubt, a girl with a strong personality. However, that ‘strength’ was rather incompatible with the impression of a pure, honest bard.

Mimi: “Gar~f, have you never heard the Songstress’s singing? It~ really is~ very powerful!”

Garfiel: “Have you, midget?”

Mimi: “Yep~! I didn’t fall asleep until the end~! Mimi’s so strong~! Praise Mimi~!”

Garfiel obediently stroked Mimi on the head. She gave a “success~!” and happily dashed away, before turning back around expectantly.

Mimi: “So, did you hear her sing?”

Kid: “Nope, we missed her. However, since we’d gone all the way to that faraway street...”

Garfiel: “‘S that why y’were playin’ in the river? Well, ‘s good that my amazin’ self was there.”

Kid: “Gorgeous Tiger!”

Garfiel: “Ha!”

As the boy stretched his hand toward the sky, Garfiel mimicked his motion.

That was a reference to Gorgeous Tiger.

They posed together energetically, but the child soon dropped his wrist with a tired sigh. Garfiel tilted his head to one side.

Garfiel: “Why’d’ya look so down? Don’t sigh, yer happiness will run away, y’know.”

Kid: “Well, that... when I get home, my sister will be mad.”

Garfiel: “What?”

As the boy revealed his fear of his sister in a cry, Garfiel overreacted by

grabbing his shoulders anxiously.

Garfiel: "Ah, sorry. But, why's she goin' to be so angry?"

Kid: "...Because, I snuck out."

Garfiel: "Ah..."

This boy seemed to have neglected to inform his sister that he would be out with friends today.

As a result, his family was probably frustrated and worried sick.

That feeling was not unfamiliar to Garfiel. As a brother, the presence of a sister, would, no matter for how long, continue to exist as a terrifying barrier.

Even after ten years of separation, after he'd grown up, the fear of losing to his sister had increased rather than decreased.

Garfiel: "Got it. Leave 't up t'my amazin' self."

Kid: "...Huh?"

Garfiel patted his chest proudly as the little boy revealed his shock.

As if trying to ease his downcast, Garfiel laughed, showing his sharp teeth.

Garfiel: “The scariness of an older sister ‘s somethin’ my amazin’ self’s familiar with. ‘F yer scary sister comes rushin’ at ya, my amazin’ self’ll protect ya.”

Kid: “Big brother!”

The emotional child hugged Garfiel tightly. Mimi joined the hug, grabbing Garfiel from behind.

In this way, being held front and back by the little ones, Garfiel renewed his determination and struggled with them as they continued their journey.

The sunset really was approaching, and they wouldn’t make it back by dinner time, but today wasn’t a bad day.

No matter how he looked at it, he wouldn’t be able to calmly dine in the same hall as Reinhard.

However, after a night of cooling down, he’d probably be able to manage it.

That was thanks to the children who admired the Gorgeous Tigers, as well as Mimi’s inscrutably infectious cheerful attitude.

???: “—Fred!”

A deafeningly high-pitched voice suddenly attacked Garfiel’s ears.

He lifted his head in surprise, and caught sight of the sprinting figure of a girl. She had long, elegant blonde hair, and was glaring intently at the boy with Garfiel.

The boy looked in her direction and opened his mouth.

Then,

Fred: "Sister..."

Sister: "You, just how worried are you going to make us before you're satisfied!?"

The girl leapt forward to deliver a flexible kick to her brother, whose body gently bounced back.

Garfiel, who'd witnessed that action, was frozen by shock and too slow to respond to the beautiful girl, who'd landed neatly.

During that time, she fixed Garfiel with a sharp gaze and dug into his foot with her heel.

Sister: "You suspicious person, what do you want with my Fred?"

Garfiel: "Gah... first 'f all, move your foot, midget."

As he faced the maelstrom of her attack and angry words, Garfiel replied in a steady voice. Seeing that her preemptive attacks hadn't caused any harm, the girl retreated backward with a timid expression.

Although she'd thought that Garfiel would be angry, Garfiel hadn't reached a state of anger yet.

Rather, he was still surprised.

He had never imagined that there would actually be a sister who indiscriminately delivered fierce kicks to her younger brother.

Incidentally, the young boy who had been kicked had had his impact softened. With a "hey~!", Mimi had flown toward him, hugging him and landing gently.

Now, they had gotten to their feet, brushing each other off.

Seeing that through the corner of his eye, Garfiel issued a sigh. And at his reaction,

Sister: "What's, with that attitude... If you have something to say, just say it, and don't do anything to me or Fred... I, I'm terrifying when I get mad..."

Garfiel: "First of all, 's misunderstandin' here. Also, don't fly toward yer brother like that. Y'might accidentally cause a heavy, injury, got 't?"

Sister: “Hah...”

Squatting down, Garfiel spoke quietly to the girl.

The boy’s sister was also young — only around ten years old, the age of precocious puberty where she’d try a little too much. Her initial sharpness had faded, and her expression morphed into one of tearfulness at Garfiel's calm and steady response.

What she said was surel a bluff, but she’d gathered her courage to go up against Garfiel. In a sense, her courage had rendered her even more afraid, in an unfortunate turn of events.

Fred: “Uwa, Gorgeous Tiger... Please don’t get too angry with my sister.”

Then, unable to bear seeing his trembling sister, the boy patted his body clean of dust and stood at her back, pleading with Garfiel. His sister’s expression revealed that her self-esteem was hurt over his pleas on her behalf, but she still had the dignity to try to protect her brother from Garfiel. Although he didn’t know what had happened at first, they didn’t seem to have a bad relationship.

Garfiel: “So my amazin’ self looks like a bad guy. ‘S kinda displeasing t’hear.”

Mimi: “A bad guy! Being a bad guy isn’t good~, Gar~f, be Gorgeous Tiger instead!”

Mimi leapt up and gave Garfiel’s head a poke. Although it didn’t hurt, it was a rather puzzling blow.

The pointless confrontation between siblings and Garfiel then continued.

Just as he wondered how long this would last,

???: “Sister, Fred, where are you two?”

The voice that broke the stalemate came from someone else.

Hearing that gentle voice, the siblings caught each other’s gaze. Garfiel watched as the two ran in its direction.

Sister and brother arrived at the corner of the road, where a woman had appeared. They flew toward her without hesitation.

That blonde woman was more than likely their mother.

Fred: “Mom!”

Sister: “Mom, that suspicious person, something about gorgeous, and Fred...”

The elder sister held onto her mother, sobbing, and the little brother defended Garfiel’s innocence. After listening to the children’s rambles, the person in question smiled.

Garfiel: “——”

She stepped forward, her children still clinging to her, revealing her face.

Mimi: “Gar~f?”

Garfiel froze, and Mimi turned around, surveying him.

However, Garfiel was unable to respond to Mimi’s concern. His heart, chaotic with waves of confusion, had no such energy to spare.

After all, the person who stood there was,

???: “Well, my children seem to have been taken care of, my apologies. If possible, could you tell me what happened?”

She spoke in soothing, gentle tones which held not even the slightest sign of malice or suspicion.

With a few strides, she’d arrived in front of him. Even as Garfiel trembled and shivered at her presence, she tilted her head, as if confused.

That expression, that attitude, that voice, they all seized Garfiel with abject shock.

Garfiel: “—Mom?”

A hoarse murmur escaped his throat.

Chapter 30: Tiger and Cat Under the Moon

???: "I'm so sorry, I wasn't expecting guests, so I haven't cleaned."

Mimi: "Hmm~! We don't mind~! It looks clean~! Very clean~! Mimi's room looks a lot more chaotic~!"

???: "Ah, ah, that's no good."

The woman casually stroked Mimi, who lay on the sofa, kicking her legs and looking very comfortable.

Immersed in this scene, Garfiel looked silently at the woman. Her long blonde hair flowed to her waist, her skin was the white of snow, her slim body retained a woman's softness, and her soft face displayed a pair of clear, calm emerald green eyes.

She looked to be as young as 25, but Garfiel knew that she should be over 35.

No matter what, this didn't match up to Garfiel's expectations, which was precisely the source of his confusion,

???: "Mr. Gorgeous Tiger, does tea not match your tastes? I'm sorry, I didn't even think to ask what you'd like to drink..."

The woman, who claimed to be Real Thompson, frowned at the silent

Garfiel, who was shaken back into awareness by her voice. He looked down at his untouched black tea and hurriedly picked the cup up.

Garfiel: “No, no, my amazin’ self was jus’ bein’ a bit silly... the spaciousness’f this room’s unusual, ‘s all.”

Reala: “Is that so? My family’s very big, and so is our house, but that makes it hard to clean. It looks like I was careless again.”

Reala accepted Garfiel’s hurried excuse without a trace of doubt, her charming voice light and soft. The large courtyard of her house and the exquisite workmanship reflected her statement. Her smile, her sweet tone, everything about her struck Garfiel with nostalgia.

However, Reala spoke not a word of Garfiel’s gaze. This detail alone gripped Garfiel’s heart with pain.

The woman who claimed to be Reala Thompson looked exactly like Reshia Tinsel, Garfiel’s mother, who was imprinted clearly in his mind.

Of course, Garfiel's separation from his mother had happened shortly after his birth, and his memories of his mother were scant.

Even so, Garfiel knew every detail of her face, after seeing her in that detestable cemetery where the Trial had been hosted. There, he witnessed his separation from his mother.

Her face, her voice, her love, Garfiel knew them all from the Trial.

And that Trial had shown him the her unfortunate death shortly after her departure.

So, to Garfiel, seeing his mother again is an impossible dream.

If so, now, the woman in front of him should also be impossible.

Reala: “Mimi-san, your ears look so soft. Would it be possible for me to touch them?”

Mimi: “Please go ahead~!”

Reala happily reached out, stroking Mimi’s ears with a look of contentment.

Mimi’s smile was one only a little girl could wear. They were an odd pair, a tiny beastman and a suspicious demi-human, but they had been invited in without a second thought. This woman had simply no sense of wariness.

Such attitudes were, to Garfiel, all associated with motherliness.

His mother Reshia had been quite the unfortunate woman. Her parents had lost everything to debt, and had sold her to a group of slave traders, who had been ambushed by demi-human bandits. They had made Reala their concubine.

Somewhere along the way, she’d become pregnant with Frederica, and the

bandits had put her up for sale. She'd been taken by another band of thieves and had spent a long time with them.

Frederica had grown up in that thieves regiment. Although she rarely spoke of such times, she considered Reala's departure something to be thankful for, indicating that it had been a rather poor environment.

Suffering misfortune after misfortune, she had fortunately been rescued by the curious Roswaal.

Roswaal had made her a proposal; he would take them to Sanctuary, where they would be given safety and shelter. In Sanctuary, Lewes had become their guardian.

Life's treatment toward her could only be summed up as 'cruel'.

However, his mother's personality was unknown to those who only heard the stories. Those who really knew his mother would never give her life such an unfortunate evaluation.

Lewes: "Ah, Reshia. That child was always inexplicably, abnormally optimistic, and looked toward the future. Despite suffering through painful days where she could very well have died, she would always say, 'Maybe something nice will happen tomorrow. Even if today is hard, tomorrow could be better'. Like a little child, she always looked forward to the little happy things in life."

Frederica: "Our honored mother... she may look like a foolish woman who threw things away

too easily, and, to be honest, I believe that she never really grasped lessons on how to best survive... but she was incredibly kind. She's my favorite person. With all my heart, I'm glad to be her daughter."

Roswaal: "Is this about your mother, Reshia-san? Riiiiight, although I never had too many chaaaaances to chat with her face to face, she was incomprehensible. Or maybe it's better to say incredible? She was muuuuch more sensitive of happiness than most people. She was always cheerful, finding happiness in eeeeven the worst of situations. Yeeeeep, that's not something I disliiiiiike."

Lewes, Frederica, and even Roswaal all spoke fondly of her.

Within Sanctuary, anyone who'd known his mother said the same thing.

She was someone who was always relaxed and happy.

If that hadn't been the case, she wouldn't have foolishly left to look for Garfiel's father, who had more than likely encountered misfortune.

And then she had immediately suffered another misfortune and died, and where was her happiness?

— He had never found the answer to where her happiness had ended up.
Garfiel: "If I don't find it, it's better to give up."

Nails dug into the palm of his hand as he had clenched his fist.

He should have given up. But he'd never understood that. It had taken a long time, but he'd finally grown to accept it.

This was plainly the case, but why, now, had she appeared again?

With her, as always, carefree, and cheerful attitude.

Garfiel: "—"

In order to keep her from noticing, he'd resigned himself to secretly observing her expressions and behaviors.

Nothing felt unnatural. His mother's behavior of treating him as a stranger was completely natural, and the more Garfiel watched, the more fascinated she became.

Was this her answer?

She had a new life. Unaware of Garfiel, she led her happy life.

I don't care to know about your affairs, was that his mother's answer to—

Fred: "Moooom."

Sister: "Mom, I'm hungry."

Garfiel had been silent as Mimi and Realá played around. The brother and sister joined them in the living room after going to their rooms to change.

The sister cast a stern look at the Garfiel, and then immediately huddled close to her mother.

Sister: “Mom, tell the guests to go home, and then we can eat.”

Realá: “Sister, what are you talking about? Mr. Gorgeous and Mimi took care of Fred when he nearly drowned.”

Sister: “About that, couldn’t it be that Gorgeous was the one who did it? So he could come to our house and take advantage of our generosity. Maybe he wants money.”

Realá: “Hey now, that’s going too far. But you’re right, we have to thank him for Fred... should we give him money?”

Sister: “Mom!?”

The sister, who had realized that her words were about to become the reason for her family’s bankruptcy, flew into a panic. On the other hand, Realá, who failed to grasp the reason for her daughter’s rant, glanced around in confusion.

That smiling interaction between parent and child made breathing harder than walking barefoot on thorns. Draining his tea in one gulp, Garfiel set his cup down with a clang.

Garfiel: “Since my amazin’ self don’t seem t’be welcome here, we’ll be leavin’.”

Mimi: “Haauhh? Why~?”

Garfiel: “Ain’t no particular why.”

Although Garfiel wanted to leave, Mimi continued to resist. However, as if he hadn’t heard her, Garfiel picked her up. As he stood to go, Realá looked distraught, while her daughter cast a smirk at him.

Well, Garfiel would respect her feelings — and, with that thought, Fred: “Don’t go, Gorgeous Tiger...”

Seizing the hem of Garfiel pants, the little brother blocked his way.

For a second, for reasons unknown to him, Garfiel hesitated to shake off his little hands. But,

Sister: “Fred, honestly, you’re...”

As Fred advocated for a suspicious criminal to stay, his sister placed her hands on her waist in anger. Realá clapped her hands, capturing everyone’s attention.

Realá: “Everyone, look, it’s not good to not get along. You’re pushing our guests to leave, Fred seems to want them to stay, so don’t force them to do anything, Sister.”

Sister: “But, mom...”

Reala: “But nothing. Mr. Gorgeous and Mimi, stay for a while, won’t you? I’d be delighted to share dinner with you, and tonight’s meal is my favorite dish.”

Fred: “Mooooom, you call everything your best dish...”

Reala: “Mhm, shouldn’t that be obvious? Mom always tries her best on every dish for you.”

Although her ability wasn’t quite there, she made every effort to do her best. Everyone present wore a panicked expression, Garfiel moreso than anyone else.

This harmonious atmosphere. It cut deeply into Garfiel’s heart.

Reala’s words cast upon him a unique sense of happiness and helplessness.

Accepting her invitation would be the worst possible thing that Garfiel could do.

Garfiel: “Sorry ‘bout yer invitation, but a few ‘f my companions’re waitin’ for me. They’ll be worried if we’re late, so we should be headin’ out soon.”

Reala: “.....”

Suppressing the the pain in his chest, Garfiel prayed that voice wouldn’t tremble.

At his answer, the sister's face became stiff, and Reala frowned with her eyes closed. And, Reala: "I understand, there is no point in forcing you to stay if it bothers you." Garfiel: "—hk"

This was what had hurt Garfiel the most today.

Losing to Reinhard in that duel, the initial impact of seeing Reala, were, compared to how he was feeling now, trivial indeed.

Unconsciously, Garfiel placed a hand close to his chest, as if needing to confirm whether or not his body had been torn. And to that Garfiel,

Mimi: "Garfiel, let's go."

Mimi, who had until just refused to leave, gently taken Garfiel's hand in hers and began leading him away. Facing her concern, Garfiel obeyed silently.

So, with their hands on the living room on the door handle, ready to leaving,

???: "I'm home! Oh, do we have guests?"

The figure on the other side of the door was a gentleman sporting a magnificent beard.

He appeared to be a man of detailed workmanship, and gave off an energetic atmosphere. From his tone to face, he seemed to be a man of accomplishments.

At the man's appearance, the children scrambled to their feet with joy.

Then, that man would be—

Dad: "Hmm... I haven't seen this stranger's face before."

Fred: "Dad, this is Gorgeous Tiger."

Sister: "He's a suspicious scoundrel."

Dad: "What?"

Faced with his son and daughter's sharply contrasting attitudes, the father tilted his head in distress. He turned to Realá, who stood quietly in the living room.

Under the man's loving gaze, Realá started to give a calm response.

Garfiel had hit his limit.

Garfiel: "It ain't a big deal, we were goin' anyway."

Leaving that sentence, Garfiel grabbed Mimi and hurriedly pushed his way of out the room, scrambling toward the front door as if running away.

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger!”

From behind, a sad voice called to Garfiel.

However, Garfiel had no response to that call.

Who was Gorgeous, who was Tiger? He was Garfiel, not Gorgeous Tiger.

A tiger was a strong, powerful creature who couldn’t be shaken by anything.

Where was that tiger now?

A real tiger, wouldn’t be so affected by such things—!

Mimi: “Garfiel! My hand, it hurts!”

Garfiel: “——”

Too focused on his thoughts, Garfiel didn’t notice that cry of pain.

He didn’t notice until Mimi had broken free of his vice grip, extracting her hand from his nails, which had been digging into her. Her small hand was now swollen and blue.

Garfiel: “S-sorry... my amazin’ self...”

Mimi: “Gar~f, you were weird at that house too. My hand really~ hurts.”

Mimi mumbled quietly, and Garfiel smacked his forehead with his hand.

They fell into a discordant silence as the Watergate City’s moist air caressed their faces. The sun had fallen from the sky, and the city had been shrouded in magical light.

The sunshine on the water's surface was replaced by light from the magical lamps, but he was in no mood to enjoy that scene mysterious and quiet beauty,

???: “Hey, you two, over there!”

Someone approached Garfiel and Mimi with gasping breaths.

Looking up, the magic light revealed the man from before, who had shed his coat. Finally arriving in front of the two, he put his hands on his knees, panting violently.

Dad: “Ah, I finally caught up... this won’t do... I used to be more energetic, but thanks to work, I’m completely out of shape now...”

Garfiel: “Do ya need anythin’ from us?”

Garfiel had clearly indicated that he wasn’t interested in the man’s words.

The existence of this man, although not to the degree of Reala's children, also distressed Garfiel. His voice was full of harshness, but the man paid no mind to it, placing his hand on his head embarrassedly.

Dad: "No, I heard from my wife that you two were benefactors of my son. It'd be completely unjustifiable if I never gave you anything in return."

Garfiel: "... 's not such a big deal, 'f y'talk all exaggeratedly like that, my amazin' self'll be embarrassed."

Garek: "Everything involving my kid, no matter what, is incredibly important, not to mention saving him from danger. Really, if you need anything at all... Ah, I'm really sorry, my name is

Garek, Garek Thompson. Despite how I look, I'm Pristella's Metropolitan Director, so if there's anything I can do to help you..."

Garfiel: "Really, we're..."

A man who knew what was going on— Garfiel, who had wanted to leave as soon as possible, suddenly paused. If he knew Reala, really knew her, then,

Garfiel: "My amazin' self's got only one question... would it be okay for ya t'answer?"

Garek: "Of course. No matter what, I'll do my best to answer."

Garek responded to Garfiel with a smile of only benevolence.

The same was true of Reala too, and their son Fred. This entire family was too kind for their own good. Only their daughter had any sense of suspicion.

Thinking of this, Garfiel was very cautious in his choice of words,

Garfiel: “Your wife, Reala... what’s her real name?”

Garek: “—”

As soon as Garfiel posed his question, the atmosphere shifted.

Garek pondered Garfiel’s question silently for a few moments, before replying in a level voice, Garek: “What do you mean?”

Garfiel: “I mean the literal meanin’. No matter what, Reid plays a straight game, right? Playin’ with words don’t fit my style. Tell me, your wife, s’her name Reshia stead’of Reala?”

Garek: “—gu”

He responded awkwardly to Garfiel’s direct question, taking a moment to swallow before replying.

Garek: “You... you, my wife... Do you know anything about my wife?”

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self also wants to know about her.”

Garek: “——”

Garfiel responded sincerely to Garek’s trembling voice.

At those words, Garek fell into a silence, as if he were thinking. Waiting for his reply, Garfiel took Mimi’s good hand into his own.

Glancing up at him, she smiled as she usually did.

Garek: “... it seems that I should tell you the full story.”

As Garfiel looked at Mimi’s smile, Garek spoke with a sigh.

His voice was weighed with fatigue and powerlessness. Garfiel frowned, wondering and waiting for his next sentence.

Then,

Garek: “My wife, Reala... has no memories from before our meeting, 15 years ago.”

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Garek and Realá had met before he'd become a city director, when he had been a normal merchant rooted in Pristella.

On the way back from negotiations, Garek, who had been driving a dragon carriage, had found his path blocked by a collapsed cliff.

Having encountered such distress in having to repay a loan, and having met such an unfortunate accident on the road, Garek couldn't but be angry.

— Then, he found a woman who'd been buried alive. A miracle. There was no other explanation.

Refusing to go the long way, Garek had been desperately wondering if he could still follow his original route.

Around that time, the heavy rain had finally stopped, and Garek's full field of vision had been returned to him.

Shortly after the cliff had collapsed, Garek had come by, leaving the time that the woman had been buried fairly short.

As a result of the various coincidences overlapping, Garek had found and rescued the woman, who was still breathing.

She'd been covered in mud, and he'd found no luggage near her. Taking the unconscious woman to his dragon carriage, Garek immediately rushed to a

nearby town, where she'd been taken to the hospital, and awaited her rehabilitation.

Garek: "At the time, her condition was incredibly unstable. She was running a high fever, and had various injuries and fractures from the landslide, and her heart even stopped at one point during the treatment."

Both the Healing Institute and Garek had been struggling to help her, optimistically praying for her recovery. Why had Garek wanted so desperately wanted to save her? There had indeed been a reason, yet unknown to him, which explained his actions.

He thanked everyone's efforts from the bottom of his heart.

Garek: "Hard work paid off, and although she was still heavily wounded, she'd finally woke up. It took a week... I stayed in the city, waiting for her."

The failure of negotiations had made the future of Garek's company dark indeed.

In that situation, wasting time equated wasting money. Garek didn't understand why he had been restraining himself from his travels.

Then, after a week, the woman had woken up.

After her awakening, she spoke to the crowd gathered around her with a trembling, faint voice.

Garek: “Who am I?”, “Were her first words.”

The woman had forgotten her name. No, not just the name. She’d forgotten everything.

Who was she, and where was she supposed to be? What had happened before that cliff had collapsed?”

She could not remember her family members, and had no choice but to stay.

All she had were the clothes she’d worn during the accident. From an emblem stitched onto them, the only discernible letters of her name were ‘Re’.

Garek: “Influenced by the name of a blossoming flower, I decided to call her Reala. Then, I planned to take care of her until her wounds had healed.”

Her wounds healed little by little, and the day of her discharge wasn’t far off.

Reala, even having nowhere to go, remained a cheerful woman. She treated the sadness of the accident as though it had never happened, and gave everyone she came in contact with infectious smiles.

In her situation, it would be impossible not to feel uneasy.

The loss of one’s own memories was almost equivalent to their own disappearance.

But she could still smile because she felt it necessary to do so.

Or maybe she was concerned for the people around her.

But the most important reason was that she didn't see herself as unfortunate.

Garek: "The nervousness from confessing to her is still fresh in my memory. That's probably the most anxious I've ever been in my life, even more so than when I proposed marriage to her."

So, accepting Garek's proposal, Reala went with him to Pristella.

There reason he refused to abandon her, that he had waited so long for her to wake up, was incredibly simple.

Garek had fallen in love with her at the very beginning, at the moment when he'd dragged her from the cliff his dragon carriage, cleaning the mud from her face.

Garek: "My business, which had been unlucky until I took in Reala, improved quickly. The people around me said that that was all thanks to my talent, but really, it was all thanks to Reala. I was blessed with her, so now I can be a businessman like this, so I can be a better father."

Garfiel: "—"

Garek: "I love my wife, and our children are both very cute. I used to care about her past, but, at this moment, no matter who she was before, I consider my wife my most important person."

Garek finished speaking of their first encounter and concluded thus with embarrassment.

Garfiel, who has been silent from beginning to end, listening intently, looked up at the sky.

In the darkness, stars were scattered everywhere.

The glorious full moon and stars were probably contemptuous of his current thoughts.

Garek: "I'm very sorry to ask this of you, but I can't help but do so."

Garfiel: "—"

"What is the relationship between you... and my wife, Lira?"

This — how cruel this was.

His line of sight fell from the sky to Garek.

Garek's gentle eyes held a firm determination as he gazed at Garfiel. He was empathetic, and wouldn't be so insensitive as to misunderstand what Garfiel

would say.

And so Garfiel knew exactly which answer would be correct.

Garfiel: “——”

Opening and closing his mouth.

Breathing, exhaling, inhaling, breathing evenly.

A fast heartbeat. Dizziness. A burst of pain in his head, the need to retch.

The swirl of yet unformed emotions in his tight chest were on the verge of collapse.

—Mimi gripped his hand tightly.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self, has...”

Garek: “——”

Garfiel: “Nothin’... to do with your wife.”

There.

He'd said it, said it out loud.

With that sentence, the vortex swirling in Gafiel's heart swiftly vanished.

He was left with only a sense of loss suffocation. Garek, who stood in front of him, lowered his head as if he'd made a mistake and didn't want to look Garfiel in the face, speaking with a trembling voice."

Garek: "Sorry, I'm so sorry..."

With a look of unnatural pain, he bowed.

However, Garfiel didn't want to see Garek's reaction.

He had already had enough. He wanted to leave, wanted to stop being hurt.

What had gone wrong? Whose fault is it? Was it his own fault, or was it Garek's fault? Who should he blame? Who should he attack, who should he strike, who should he send flying?

What could he go to end the pain in his heart, to make it vanish, disappear?

???: "Honey, this is great, Mr. Gorgeous and Mimi are still here." Garfiel
"—!?"

Those words echoed with immense volume.

Grief and turmoil raised the intense noise as if it could kill.

To Garfiel, it felt sharper than a knife.

Garek: "Reala, why...?"

Reala: "You left in such a hurry, but I didn't want you to leave empty-handed, so..."

Reala blinked and strode past the shocked Garek.

Then, she approached the stunned, stiff Garfiel, stretching out her hand.

Reala: "This is the dessert that I made, a souffle. Although it's not a very expensive gift, I'm still proud of it. I hope you'll accept it."

Garfiel: "...m."

Her smile held not a trace of malice.

Stubbornly, Garfiel refused to speak.

His exchange with Garek had opened old wounds, preventing him from being able to speak to Reala. Anyone who understood this would also understand how to act.

And yet,

Mimi: “Oh! A dessert, that’s so much fun! Amazing, I’ll share it with Missy!”

Reala handed the container to a smiling, indifferent Mimi. There was a limit to how much someone could neglect to notice the atmosphere.

Garek looked shocked, and Garfiel was speechless. However, Reala only gave a joyful laugh at Mimi’s reaction.

Reala: “I'm so glad you like it, and please go share it with the one called Missy.”

Mimi: “Okay, got it~! Unter... understood~!”

After saluting with the hand which hadn’t been squeezed by Garfiel, Mimi took the container in her arms and clapped Garfiel on the back.

She applied enough power that he couldn’t help but cough, and Mimi smiled.

Mimi: “Well, this time, we’re really leaving! Gorgeous Tiger and Gorgeous Mimi will see you later~!”

Reala: “Alright, safe travels, and take care not to fall in the water, Mr. Gorgeous.” Mimi took Garfiel’s hand, and Reala waved as they left.

Smiling, Mimi turned back and waved energetically. Only the two men were left with pained expressions in this smiling farewell.

Garfiel: “.....”

Like this, Garfiel was led along the waterways by Mimi.

Mimi and Garfiel didn't speak until far after Realá had vanished from view.

Garfiel: “Hey, midget...”

Mimi: “Over~ here~!”

Garfiel: “——!?”

Garfiel had wanted to call Mimi, but was suddenly interrupted.

Mimi, still holding Garfiel's hand, briskly leapt onto the three story stone building, ascending with the use of footholds.

Garfiel was pulled along, of course, forced to take the same pace as her. With a few leaps, the two had reached the top of the building.

Mimi: “Mimi~ feels so good~!”

Garfiel: “So Good', my foot! What were y'pullin', jus' now...”

As Mimi called out her comfort while she bathed in the breeze, Garfiel went on to complain. However, he saw that Mimi's smile had disappeared as she watched him.

He saw himself reflected in her round eyes, and Garfiel didn't understand the unease brewing in his heart.

Mimi's expression fell at Garfiel's silence.

Mimi: "Garf, do you want to cry?"

Garfiel: "Huh? What're y'sayin', why would my amazin' self be cryin'?"

Mimi: "I know that Garf is strong, but you shouldn't put on that brave act. Since Reala is Garf's mother, right~?"

Garfiel: "——"

At Mimi's unexpected question, Garfiel held his breath.

She'd accurately grasp the flow of the things. If she'd known Garfiel's past, then that conclusion would be easy to make. However, Mimi knew nothing about Garfiel's family. Her ability for discerning the truth was really rather impressive.

That she had straightforwardly brought the subject up shook Garfiel, and he hesitated.

Garfiel: “Why... would ya... think that...?”

Mimi: “Garf and Realá smell super~ similar, and her children also smelled a bit like Garf, so I was wondering if that was the case.”

Her assumption wasn’t based on reasoning, it was based on something innate, and thus she could see the truth for what it was.

If Mimi had inferred her conclusion from Garfiel’s words, he could have made attempts to hide his past, but Garfiel couldn’t refute something like this.

His legs giving way, Garfiel looked up at the stars in a daze.

The stars and moon both were unchanged, looking down at Garfiel with the same gaze.

Mimi: “So, is that right? Is Realá Garf’s mother?”

Garfiel: “... My amazin’ self doesn’t know. ‘S that woman still my amazin’ self’s mother?”

At Mimi’s words, Garfiel covered his face with a hand.

He didn’t know how true that was.

Realá was unmistakably Reshia.

Just as Garek said, as Reala herself had acted until now, Reala had completely forgotten that she was Reshia.

Forgetting everything, Reala had found a new start, raising her children, living happily.

Garfiel: “Ah, come to think ‘f it, that’d make those two kids my amazin’ self’s lil’ brother n’ sister.”

Although he had only just realized it, his half-siblings had a similar relationship with himself and Frederica. In other words, those siblings were his own lovely younger siblings. It had been a relationship he’d longing for ever since he’d been little.

— Wouldn’t it be nice if he could enjoy that relationship without the circumstances surrounding it?

Garfiel: “Even‘f my amazin’ self tells her ‘bout my heritage, nothin’d change...”

Reala had forgotten her time as Reshia.

Even if Garfiel told her everything, her fifteen years as Reala would still remain unchanged.

Only, Reala would then carry an unnecessary fifteen years of guilt, feeling as if she’d lost Reala. Garek could only witness his wife's depression, and their

children would only watch their mother's pain without understanding it.

Doing so would only be for Garfiel's own sake.

Having Realá accept that she used to be Reshia would serve no one but Garfiel.

Fredrica and Lewes both had no idea that Reshia had survived. If Garfiel said nothing, the two of them would never know.

Realá's family also weren't bothered by her past. If they learned of it, those happy times would most likely be lost rather than preserved.

If Garfiel hid everything and let go, this could all be successfully resolved.

Garfiel: "Why is my amazin' self..."

Didn't he even have the courage to bury this deep in his consciousness, to bury this within himself?

Tiger, where are you? Show me the right path.

If he could bear everything, take on everything alone, where would he find that strength?

Tell me, tiger... tiger. A true tiger was the strongest existence that would not

be lost to anyone.

Garfiel: “——”

Holding his head, biting down on his overflowing, lamenting the feelings swirling back and forth mixing together, losing them and finding them.

Mimi: “It’s okay...”

In the next moment, he noticed that his head was being gently stroked.

Garfiel: “——”

Mimi grabbed the collapsed Garfiel from behind in a hug.

Resting her chin on his head, her small palm stroked Garfiel's head. That tender touch on his back, moving back and forth, gradually eased the pain and agitation in his mind.

Garfiel: “What, what’re y’doin’, this is...”

Mimi: “Hmm, if Garf needs to cry~, I think there’s a specific place where boys are allowed to cry! Although I forgot where, I remember Missy telling me about it~!”

For a moment, she seemed to be giving an answer, but her train of thought drifted away.

In order not to keep his heart from shaking, in order to keep his voice from shivering, Garfiel chose his words carefully.

Like this, holding Garfiel, Mimi giggled.

Mimi: "Well, although I've forgotten~, is it the feeling of a woman's chest? Is it like that? That's it! It's alright for a man to cry on an interested woman's chest~!"

Garfiel: "...who'd be interested in a midget like you."

The one Garfiel was interested in was a woman who was never kind when he wanted her to be, but kind when he least expected, after which she would beat him with her fists, a woman who was incredibly difficult to deal with.

The girl in front of him didn't resemble her at all.

However, Mimi was still smiling.

Mimi: "That's fine! Even if Garfiel's not interested, Mimi's already fascinated! I saw~ and became interested in Garfiel! So! Mimi's chest~! It's okay to cry there~!"

Garfiel: "—Ah..."

What a foolish notion.

What was this. Some kind of language game? It was only a child's excuse, loaded with nothing but assertiveness.

There was obviously nothing, so stop kidding around.

Tiger... tiger, where are you?

Right now, come back to my heart. Howl your deep, ferocious roar, beat this slouched back, force me to wake up, do something to my feelings

Otherwise, otherwise... otherwise, it would be too late.

Garfiel: "Mother..."

Enough, enough, stop talking.

Crying with a weak voice, don't make such a weak of voice.

He was a tiger, the most powerful, the strongest, stronger than anyone. The Strongest of Shields.

However,

Garfiel: "Mother... mother... mama... mama!"

Mimi: “Good boy.”

Garfiel: “Why! Why’d ya forget me!? Seein’ ya after all this time! Even callin’ you mom!”

Mimi: “It’s alright, Garfiel’s good boy, a good boy!”

Garfiel: “Mama... mama... mama...!”

Tiger, tiger... where are you?

What did he resemble now? Stars, moon, sky, tell me.

What did he resemble now?

If he couldn’t be a roaring tiger, then, right now, he merely resembled —

Chapter 31: The Cost of a Mistake

Mimi: “I got it~!”

Garfiel: “Annoyin’, how many times ya gonna say it!”

The next morning, Garfiel, looking to be in a rather poor state, walked the streets with Mimi.

Giggling, Mimi touched the chest of her robe, which were stained with Garfiel’s tears and saliva.

The stench had reached the point of causing Garfiel’s nose pain.

To Mimi, who had the same sharp sense of smell, that stench must have been unbearable, but when Garfiel had advised her to wash it, she’d replied,

Mimi: “Mmm, it’s fine! After returning to the hotel, I can get a chance of clothes~. Missy’ll be really mad that I didn’t go back last night. Hetaro and Tivey too~!”

Garfiel: “...sorry.”

Mimi: “Mimi isn’t worried about it~! Mimi’ll only say that Garf’s a good, good boy when Garf sobs and cries!”

At Garfiel's soft apology, Mimi only gave an innocent smile.

Last night, Garfiel had shared a second farewell with his mother.

After being hit by a series of wounds, he had shamefully ended up crying into Mimi's chest on rooftop.

And, even more embarrassingly, the sobbing had drained him so much that he'd fallen asleep.

The next morning, a loud noise in the city had woken him up on Mimi's lap.

When the owner of the rooftop had found them, he'd finally managed to maintain his composure, and Mimi had worn her usual attitude.

Excuses were hard to find, so they'd slunk off of his rooftop, embarrassed.

Mimi: "Do you feel better~?"

Garfiel: "Ah, kinda. Somehow, it's, that's..."

Mimi: "It's like that, right?"

Garfiel: "...yeah, like that."

Unable to voice his true gratitude, Garfiel frowned, but Mimi completely ignored his failure, leaving Garfiel with no clue what to say.

He recalled last night, when Mimi blurted out that she was interested in him.

Involuntarily, his eyes chased Mimi's figure.

Before, he'd thought that Mimi was just tagging along with him, feeling companionship with him due to their shared non-human heritage, but she'd unexpectedly been following him with romantic intent.

And, even having given her confession, she acted the same as she always had.

He did the same with Ram, but, when the situation was reversed, he felt thrown off. That weakness was just another shameful part of Garfiel.

Mimi: "Well, what should we do this morning? Go to your mother and see her?"

His thoughts having been sidetracked, Garfiel jumped both at the suddenness of Mimi's words and their actual content.

Garfiel: "W-Wait a sec. Why, why'd we go'n go see her?"

Mimi: "Because Realá is Garf's mother, shouldn't she know that as well."

Garfiel: "This midget really ain't have a clue to read between lines..."

Aside from using instinct to spot the most important part of their relationship, Mimi was unaware of the subtleties involved. He was in a difficult position, unable to answer questions about whether or not they were family. Garfiel immediately realized that it was useless to try to explain, and then gave up. And realized that that was another problem.

Garfiel: "It's fine... ain't no need's let'r know that my amazin' self's her son."

Mimi: "Is that really okay?"

Garfiel: "Yeah, it is... Ah, my amazin' self will leave it up to my sister."

He would probably inform his rational sister.

After the initial shock and confusion passed, she would certainly come to the same conclusion as Garfiel, even faster than he had.

Only, even if their conclusions weren't the same, she still had the right to know that their mother was still alive. But would it be right to have her bear the pain as he did?

Garfiel: "You jus' take some time, think things out."

Mimi: "So it's like that~. That's really hard~, Mimi~, just thinks that moms should be gotten along with~."

Garfiel: "...should be gotten along with?"

Mimi's words were unexpected, and so Garfiel's ear shuddered as he asked.

Mimi nodded with an imposing attitude that declared, "Yep~!".

Mimi: "Mimi, Hetaro, and Tivey never knew Mom and Dad. They probably thought "triplets~, raising a super big family is too hard~" so they left us somewhere~. Then, we were picked up by the Chief, so he's family, and Missy is family too!"

Garfiel: " ... so... y'really do have a big family."

Without knowing the reason, he suddenly felt that the atmosphere had relaxed as he stroked Mimi's head.

At that moment,

Mimi: "—waah!"

Mim quickly leapt away from his hand.

Garfiel stared at her reddened face, as she spun around with a whirring sound while rubbing it.

Mimi: "Something, is different than yesterday... stranger when Garf acts so suddenly."

Garfiel: “Right, sorry... d’ya want my amazin’ self t’leave?”

Mimi: “I don’t want that either~, something not too close and not too far feels the best~.” She scrambled away with small steps, stopping in a place outside of his reach.

Garfiel frowned, confused, as Mimi gave her usual “hehe~” laugh. Just now, his own face seemed to tingle with a little redness.

Mimi: “Hey, let’s eat the souffle!”

Garfiel: “Y-yeah, sure...”

As if in a hurry to change the topic, Mimi withdrew the dessert box from her pocket.

That was what Reala had given Mimi last night, before they’d parted ways.

Momentarily, a numb of pain flowed through his chest as Mimi held the snacks toward him, the aroma wafting gently to his nose.

The dessert was a little like bread, with sweet condiment added to the dough, stuffed with cream and bean paste.

There were two large, round souffles in the box, one each for Mimi and Garfiel, which would serve as their breakfast.

Mimi: “Yay! It's sweet~! Delicious! Super delicious, super delicious~!”

Garfiel: “Ah, really’s good!”

Garfiel voiced his agreement to Mimi’s loud applause.

The dessert was slightly sweet, but not overwhelmingly sugary, and the dough fluffy and soft. If freshly baked, it would have been even more delicious. This was a mother’s expert cooking.

In that case, Garfiel could have had more chances to taste it.

Mimi: “Gar~f?”

Garfiel: “This really isn’t like my amazin’ self, yeah?”

At Mimi’s concern, Garfiel shoved those wishful thoughts away.

He returned his thoughts to his friends, who were waiting for him. Like Mimi, Garfiel stayed out without permission.

Because of that, he would certainly be severely reproached—

???: “—Hello, hello? Is this okay? Can everyone hear? Meat creatures who can hear, good for you! Meat creatures who can’t, go fester and die, that’d be a huge help. Gahahahaha—”

Garfiel: “What?”

Mimi: “Hmm~?”

Just having taken a short step forward, a voice suddenly assaulted their eardrums.

The two glanced at each other and looked up to the sky at the same time, where the voice seemed to be booming from.

Garfiel: “That voice sounds like...”

???: “Well, well, well, was there any idiot who died from shock at that moment? If not, well, it doesn’t really matter, but if there’s anyone who dares to ignore this lovely lady, then, my mood will be ruined!”

Ignoring the Garfiel, the voice kept speaking at that annoying volume.

The others walking on the morning streets all looked up at the sky, dumbfounded.

A shockingly loud voice — that conclusion would be wrong.

Garfiel, whose sense of hearing was different from a regular human’s could tell that this voice wasn’t a loud one coming from one source; rather, it

permeated the entire city, spreading the way an echo would.

However, knowing that didn't answer any questions.

???: "You boring creatures do nothing but ruin my mood. There's no value here at all. —You're all just garbagegarbagegarbage! Clear your disgusting minds of your ugly thoughts, and immediately find a ditch of waste to stick your head into and down in! Please go die soon, please, I beg you! Gahahaha!"

— The owner of this voice had the most vile of souls.

Garfiel: "What kind 'f joke 's this? Stop fuckin' around!"

Mimi: "Garf... I keep feeling like this is super, super uncomfortable..."

As Garfiel cursed in irritation, Mimi showed an uneasy expression. At her, Garfiel traced the scar on his forehead, gritting his teeth.

That expression didn't suit her. That expression, he didn't want to see it from her.

???: "Well, well, then, since the bit dull rotten meat creatures can't figure it out, I'll explain it. I have control of the radio— meaning, meaning, meaning—!"

Garfiel: "Get on with it, what's the meanin'?"

???: "That——— I, no, we have control of the City Hall. Ah, by the way, is

there a control tower at the end of the city? That's also ours now!"

Garfiel: "Control tower... what did Otto-nii?"

Hearing this, Garfiel began to recall the true purpose of the tower, and as he did, Garfiel understood the threat, and held his breath.

Before and after arriving at the city, he'd heard about Pristella's structure from Otto. Pristella's ever functioning watergate could trap any enemy in the city if they were lured within.

And, in charge of that gate's operation, control towers located in each corner of the city, were controlled by this host, who possessed the most vile character possible. The entire city's population had been taken hostage.

Reaching the same conclusion as Garfiel, panic and anxiety began to spread though the civilians.

Everyone shouted at the same time, and the city rang with toxic laughter.

???: "Kahahahaha—! By now! At this moment! Only now are you realizing that you're all going to be decimated! It's shocking how brainless you all are! It's too much for me! Ah, garbagegarbagegarbage! Gahahaha—"

Garfiel: "——"

???: "Oh, this won't do. Any longer without giving my name, you're all going

to start trying to escape reality? Why don't you allow this gentle and kind lady's mercy give you a plain and easy answer?"

In the panicked city, Garfiel held Mimi's hand tightly.

Then listen carefully to what the voice is saying.

Capella: "I am the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Lust—"

Garfiel: "Witch Cult—!"

Capella: "Capella Emerada Lugunica! Gahahaha! Respect me! Worship me! Then cry and beg and die tragically like worms! You rotten slabs of meat! Kahahahaha—!"

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Upon hearing the broadcast, Garfiel had been forced to make a series of choices.

Although the broadcast of the self-proclaimed archbishop induced panic, the actions of the citizens of Pristella were very orderly. Even in that turmoil, they kept emergency procedures in mind and fled into the shelters scattered around Pristella.

Passerbys had attempted to lead Garfiel and Mimi into a shelter. However, they had refused to take their lead and instead chose to go elsewhere.

That had led Garfiel to another choice.

Then, the result of that choice—

Reala: “Ah, Mr. Gorgeous!”

Garfiel: “— —”

In another shelter, Reala had run toward Garfiel upon seeing him, relieved to find an acquaintance.

Garfiel endured the pain in his heart and allowed her to approach.

—And the result of that choice,

From the very moment Garfiel had refused to be led to a nearby shelter, this choice was imminent.

Where should he be? With Emilia and Subaru, or with the mother whose safety he’d gone out of his way to confirm?

Rationally, Garfiel knew he should have immediately returned to Emilia.

Even so, he'd made the excuse to himself that since this shelter was relatively close by, he could afford to check on her safety.

Reala: "It's great that Mimi-san is fine as well. That broadcast had me worried."

Mimi: "Ah, nothing's happened to us~! The souffle was delicious, thanks~ for the treats~!"

Reala: "Ah, that's good, I'm glad it was to your taste."

Mimi hadn't objected to any of Garfiel's choices, and had followed along faithfully.

Of course, she wanted to return to Anastasia and her brothers. To her, Reala's safety was someone else's business, and she had no real obligation to go and check.

Garfiel: "——"

While listening to his own excuse, Garfiel, having finally confirmed Reala's safety, was free to leave. He needed to immediately return to Emilia's side and defend her with vigor and strength.

When the Witch Cult appeared, Garfiel would protect Emilia and fight in her name. That was his agreement with Subaru, which he would absolutely not violate.

Even if he couldn't protect himself as a tiger, he couldn't forget himself as a man. Garfiel: "It looks like everythin's good, so my amazin' self will..."

Reala: "Wait... Mr. Gorgeous, have you..."

As Garfiel prepared to leave, Reala's unusually timid attitude frightened him.

Reala: "Have you seen my children yet? They left early this morning... and they're not in this shelter..."

Garfiel: "— —!?"

Hurriedly looking up, Garfiel scanned his surroundings, unable to see their figures anywhere here.

Reala: "Even my husband... no, nevermind, I said something superfluous..."

Garfiel: "What is it? My amazin' self'll be bothered if y' try to hide anythin' now."

Reala: "— The broadcast came from the City Hall, where my husband works... so today, when something happened there..."

Garfiel: "— —"

The City Hall was a tall building in the center of the city.

Garfiel had heard that it was in charge of the functions of the city, and the archbishop had announced that they'd seized it.

That was where Garek probably was.

Garfiel: "Haah..."

This news came far too abruptly, and Garfiel's heart quickened with the rhythm of an alarm.

The missing siblings, and Garek, who was in the middle of the most dangerous location.

Confirming Reala's safety had led him to learn of the circumstances of her family.

Garfiel: "Captain, Emilia-sama..."

Their faces, as well as Otto's and Beatrice's flashed through Garfiel's mind. He had to return and become their strength.

But, as if immediately chasing that same idea, the faces of the siblings and Garek also flashed through in mind.

Reala: "I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Gorgeous. Please forget what I

said.”

Garfiel: “.....”

Reala: “Just now, I was a little bit too frightened. My children and husband are well aware of the city’s emergency procedures.”

Reala showed them a smile of strength, but her hands were clasped, as if in prayer.

There was no doubt that her gesture was reluctant, and she was only desperately putting on an act to keep Garfiel from worrying.

Garfiel: “——”

Silence, silence, silence.

Unspeakable, gritting his teeth, Garfiel’s mind raced.

Mimi faced him, also silent, waiting for his decision.

Unspeakable, she only held his hand.

Garfiel: “...don’t worry, leave y’children ‘n husband t’us.”

Reala: “—Mr. Gorgeous!?”

That unexpected answer left Reala speechless with surprise.

Nodding to her, Garfiel looked down at Mimi.

Garfiel: “It’s my problem, s’you should go back.”

Mimi: “Hi-ya!”

Garfiel: “Ow!”

At being told to return, Mimi brought her foot down on Garfiel’s, who cried out loudly in pain.

Mimi took the moment to stand tall.

Mimi: “Garf said something so cool, so how could Mimi not match him~? I’m definitely~ going with you~!”

Garfiel: “Midget... no, ‘s fine. Sorry.”

Mimi: “At this point, you should be offering your gratitude!”

Garfiel: “—Thank you.”

Mimi: "You're welcome!"

With a sweet giggle, Mimi drew Garfiel into a laugh as well.

Then, turning back to the stunned Realá, Garfiel spoke.

Garfiel: "My amazin's self's goin' lookin' for your family, so stay here, with everyone else, and wait for us."

Realá: "But, but... why would you do that for me?"

Garfiel: "—"

Why was he doing this?

Realá's wavering gaze questioned Garfiel.

Garfiel grinned at her.

Garfiel: "Because my amazin' self's a golden tiger! Gorgeous! Tiger!"

Mimi: "Then Mimi, is also Gorgeous Mimi~!"

Shouting their stupid lines, their levity shocked the people gathered here.

At Reala's shock, Garfiel and Mimi put on a rose, then, with a valiant spin, the two rushed from the shelter.

Mimi: "Garfiel, what do we do?"

Garfiel: "Use t'smell t'find 'em. Those two'n Garek, y'still remember their smell, right?"

The problem was that this is was very large city, and the flow of water was everywhere.

To accurately find their scents, the environmental conditions needed to be right. In this populated city, a powerful sense of smell could only do so much. In spite of this, the two's animal senses served them well.

Once they'd seen Reala off safely, they found the scents of the siblings.

During this period, the evacuation of the city's citizens had proceeded smoothly. The city, unpleasant as it was, appeared to be a ghost town. In most cases like this, looting would have been expected, but the absence of that kind of immoral behavior was most likely due to the notoriety of the Witch Cult's name.

Mimi: "Hmm, is it this one? Gar~f, I smell them!"

Garfiel: "... right, and th'direction is..."

Garfiel tracked them and roughly predicted their location. They seemed to have traced yesterday's route from Third Street to First Street.

A thought flashed through his mind.

Garfiel: "Those two went to th'park t'see that Songstress..."

Fred had said yesterday that he'd left too late and failed to catch her. Having learned his lesson, he'd left early this morning, determined not to miss her again.

This time, his sister must have accompanied him.

Garfiel: "In that case, if we go to First Street..."

If they went there, they could find them fairly quickly.

Garfiel brightened slightly, thinking that the situation had turned in his favor. —And then he smelled it.

Garfiel: "——"

Mimi: "Is this their father...?"

Mimi noticed what Garfiel had.

That was, a split in the middle from the siblings. Garek had headed to the City

Hall in the middle of the city.

The moment of choice descended again on Garfiel.

If he went to First Street, he could find the siblings. If they had been at the Songstress's performance, they would certainly have found safety.

However, the City Hall was a difference case.

As time passed, the people in the City Hall, where the Witch Cult had made their attack, were in increasingly great danger.

However, Garek was in a place where, at any second, the possibility of his death would increase.

Mimi: "Gar~f.... what do we do?"

Garfiel: "——"

A decision once again fell upon Garfiel.

He could choose to confirm the survival of the siblings, who were on the way to reuniting with Subaru. In that case, he would be turning a blind eye to Garek in the City Hall.

How could Garfiel's relationship to Garek be described?

Unlike Reala, and the children born from her, there was no direct relationship between them.

If blood was used as a basis for rescue, his obligation to save Garek will cease to exist.

However, what would become of Reala, if she lost him?

She'd spend years mourning with her children, all because Garfiel gave up on the City Hall.

That family would shed endless tears.

Garfiel: "...Th'City Hall, th's where t'archbishops is, ya?"

Mimi: "Yep~!"

Garfiel: "Th'control tower's very dangerous, buf if we can jus' get the archbishop and kill 'em, then..."

Mimi: "Everyone will be saved~? Awesome~! Too awesome~!"

Bouncing on the spot, Mimi applauded Garfiel's comments.

However, she immediately stopped jumping on the spot,

Mimi: "Although, it's not a big problem, but~ I feel kind of uneasy..."

Garfiel: "Uneasy?"

Mimi: "It's very dangerous. That kind of feeling. It's not clear, but it's that feeling."

What she meant was that she had no basis for saying so.

At her timid attitude, Garfiel felt thrown off.

Up until then, Mimi had been constantly supporting him from behind, agreeing to his every decision.

Garfiel: "How shameless... expectin' others t' jus' do nothin' but support me."

Mimi: "Garfiel, what can I do?"

Garfiel: "'It'd be dumb t' ignore ya unease, n'the captain'n the others're goin' t' give me hell for it, but..."

Emilia's strongest force could not run away in fear.

And no matter how much he struggled, in order to save the city, they would need to face the City Hall eventually.

Garfiel: “First ‘f all, we have t’ confirm the situation of the City Hall. Like ‘f there’s a sentry posted there, or whether or not th’ inside is safe.”

Mimi: “You mean like scouting? Ah.... oh! I see. Let’s try it!”

Although Mimi was still a little tense, she agreed eagerly.

Seeing her draw the wand that she loved to use from her robe, Garfiel also drew his twin shields from his waist and attached them to his wrists.

As his arms were covered in silver armor, he declared himself ready.

Garfiel: “Let’s go.”

Mimi: “Mm.”

With that response to Garfiel’s brief words, the two headed toward the City Hall.

According to information from Subaru, the Sin Archbishop of Sloth had several minions fighting alongside him. Although they couldn’t match up the the archbishops, those of them who were experienced in combat were capable of posing a threat.

On the road, alert of any guards who may have been assigned there, the two travelled cautiously and carefully.

Garfiel: "...What, th's odd, what's goin' on?" However, the they couldn't see even a single cultist.

Even if they had been hiding, they couldn't have been able to cheat Garfiel and Mimi's noses. In that case,

Garfiel: "It's'f they think they don't need a guard!"

Mimi: "....."

When he remembered the voice from the broadcast, the force of Garfiel's anger became unbearable.

They had never thought that anyone would attack them. Without a sign of alertness, they assumed that their control of the building was absolute, and that they had already achieved their victory.

That arrogance, he wanted to tear apart with his claws and crunch on with his fangs.

Mimi: "H-hmm."

As Garfiel gnashed his teeth, Mimi gave a soft murmur.

Seeming subdued, she rubbed his back, looking disturbed, her nose twitching constantly.

Garfiel: "What is it?"

Mimi: "I don't know~. But, I think that something's wrong. Garf, something is, wrong..."

Garfiel: "Don't screw around!"

Seizing the hem of Garfiel's pants, Mimi suddenly spoke discouraging words.

Garfiel snapped at Mimi, who wanted to retreat after coming all the way here.

The Witch Cult had neglected to even post an outpost. Retreating just because the atmosphere seemed off wasn't something that they could do.

If they left right now, the possibility of Real's family suffering a tragedy could only increase.

Garfiel: "You can stay here 'f you don't want to go. My amazin' self'll be fine, I'll crush ther archbishop's easily!"

Mimi: "Garf!"

Shaking off the fingers on his pants, Garfiel leapt from their hiding place.

From the square along the waterway, he planned to immediately jump to the City Hall's building.

The distance was narrowing. The atmosphere remained stagnant. Their arrogance was real, what a joke.

Nothing happened. Ten steps left. Nine steps. Eight steps. Seven steps. He scaled a wall, finding a easier route to the building. Six steps. Five steps—

Mimi: “Garf—!”

Garfiel: “——!?”

Suddenly changing hs direction, Garfiel redirected his energy to his legs, leaping not forward, but sideways.

Then, the a sharp light glinted off of the edge of a quiet blade flashed by his gaze.

That destructive energy was completely silent.

The stone steps split obliquely, as if they were cut, leaving nothing behind but floating, chopped white smoke.

Garfiel: “——”

If it weren’t for Mimi’s warning cry, he would have died just now.

A beautiful and exquisite slash barely missed Garfiel's head. If that masterful slice had hit, Garfiel's head would have been pinned up for display in the square.

Cold sweat.

At that moment, Garfiel landed and turned, and saw it.

Woman: "——"

Giant: "——"

Before his eyes, two figures suddenly appeared.

One of them was a giant man, leisurely holding a large sword in each hand. The other was a slender, delicate woman, holding a long sword in her grip.

Both were wearing black headdresses, and Garfiel was unable to determine nor confirm their appearance.

Garfiel: "... 's not a nice greetin', y'know?"

Scratching the back of his neck, which was covered in cold sweat from shock, Garfiel spoke, trying to divert their attention from determining his own combat strength.

However, neither responded to Garfiel's words.

Mimi: "G-Garfiel, t-these two..."

Making a large circle around them, Mimi went to Garfiel's side.

Garfiel didn't dare to even look at Mimi, instead keeping his eye on the two figures.

Garfiel: "Yeah, they're strong."

Mimi's voice spasmed nervously, and Garfiel answered by placing his hand on her shoulders, supporting her.

The two they were facing seemed to be dreary, ominous ghosts.

The preternatural levels of danger the two exuded were impossible to accurately measure. This unfamiliar stimulation, pricking at Garfiel's skin, left his mouth dry, robbed of saliva.

Obviously, the enemy's strength far eclipsed humanity's.

They were clearly superior to that murder machine who Garfiel had once fought.

Garfiel: "Only two people...?"

No other shadows lurked around.

The only guards were the two before him. They'd cloaked their existence from Garfiel up until now, so any other potential presences shouldn't exist. Those with strength had already chosen to stop hiding it.

In other words, the two in front of them were the barriers that they needed break through in order to recapture the city hall.

At the moment when Garfiel understood this,

Garfiel: "Heh, interesting...!"

Mimi: "Garf?"

Garfiel: "So'sf we win, then we break through th'field...!"

His heart stirred with vigor as he refused to let fear dominate his heart, touching his chest with a shield as he spoke in a sharp voice. Even as his head began cooling, sparks of excitement still bounced within him.

However, grasping Garfiel's trousers, Mimi shouted,

Mimi: "N-No! Garf, no! These two people, we can't! They're super strong! Just only Mimi and Garfiel together absolutely can't win! We can't!"

Garfiel: "—Whether'er not we win, I— will win. Wouldn't win, ain't gonna

figure that. I absolutely, ain't not gonna agree with that. Also,"

Mimi was discouraged, but all that did was stimulate fear within Garfiel's own cowardice. With frustration, Garfiel pouted his mouth, but his jaw quickly filled with anger toward the hostile two before him.

Garfiel: "Even'f we run away with tails tucked between'r legs, they'll catch up't us."

Mimi: "T-Th-Then, once! We'll hit them once, dodge, and then run away. If it's just us, we have to leave! Without Joolios—!"

(she pronounces "Julius" wrong)

Garfiel: "——"

At Mimi's frantic words, Garfiel bit his lip and pondered.

Indeed, Garfiel also understood that Mimi was correct. They couldn't match up to the two of them.

Facing that kind of enemy, one on one, was undeniably suicidal.

As there was no other way, was withdrawing the right course of action?

The two figures in front of them were an overwhelmingly strong barrier. With

overwhelming power blocking them, they still needed to cross that barrier.

Garfiel, being defeated by Reinhard, was far from the strongest he could be.

He knew that he needed to become the strongest shield to those most important to him, and that to get there you must walk the strongest road, a necessary journey to become that golden tiger.

And then, like a new form of hope, him, his mother and her new family met.

If he withdrew here, Garek would—

Mimi: “—”

Again, grabbing the hem of Garfiel's pants, dominated by tumultuous thoughts, was Mimi, who held onto him with an uneasy expression. Garfiel recalled their gentle night, where she'd been his kind guardian.

Just then, his stubborn feelings began to gradually melt away.

Garfiel: “... Alright, we'll do jus'you said. After an attack, we break'way 'n find the others to come help us. —'S that okay?”

Mimi: “Yeah! Yeah! That's it— let's do it~!”

Faced with Garfiel's unflappable courage, Mimi gasped with delight.

Having unified their views, they turned to face the defensive figures before them, who had remained silent.

Their brief quarrel had provided a perfect opportunity to launch an offensive. Had they held back because of honor? Compassion? Caution?

Garfiel: “—Let’s go!”

Mimi: “Hah!”

—If they were merely cautious, it was time to crush them.

Not needing a signal, Garfiel and Mimi leapt into the fray in tandem.

Garfiel flew toward the woman, and Mimi attacked the giant.

As Garfiel approached her at bullet-like speed, the woman gently shifted her upper body, and, in the next moment, was swinging her blade downward at an alarming speed.

The beautiful flash of her sword split the air with a sharpness that fascinated Garfiel and caused him to momentarily lose himself.

Garfiel: “—kah!”

However, he wasn’t so foolish as to lose himself and allow the blade to reach

him.

It bounced into the shield on his right wrist, and he took the opportunity to kick at her. She swiftly avoided his blow and attacked again, but her lithe, terrifying form was blocked by his other shield.

With the neck as the goal of the cut-off, Garfiel shielded with his left hand. Immediately after, he kicked her, her light body flying away easily.

Garfiel: “Haah!”

Looking at the form of the woman who he’d easily beaten backwards, Garfiel felt a sense of exhilaration.

When he glanced back he saw the giant. He saw a giant who was capable of adaptability, and the attacking magic blow that flew toward it slickly passed through its massive sword.

With that, Mimi seemed to have successfully escaped.

The giant didn’t have the speed to match Mimi as she ran, and this woman didn’t have the ability to fight Garfiel. In that case,

Garfiel: “If we can beat one—!”

If he could take her out, launching another attack later would be easier.

Defeating the woman would make the giant much easier to shred.

Garfiel leapt forward toward the collapsed woman, her sword colliding with his left wrist.

He brought his right shield upon her slender, frail form. She couldn't have the same regeneration ability as Elsa.

Garfiel: "Got ya!"

He'd be able to take out the woman.

At the moment when Garfiel confirmed this and raised his voice, Death came from behind.

— The giant, who should have been a ways away, approached Garfiel, bringing with him the stench of Death. Garfiel instinctively reacted like a loaded spring.

Immediately interrupting his attack, he brought his left wrist back to his back, leaping away from the spot.

However, another attack from his back smashed Garfiel's left wrist as he was sent to the ground with a cry.

Garfiel: "Ahrhh!?"

“__”

Garfiel, who was swallowed up by the shock, groaned violently for an unimaginable blow.

Bouncing up from the ground, his body, caught in midair, once again faced an outrageous attack. With the help of his twin shields, he mounted a defense against the impact — but he was sent flying by the momentum.

Targeting Garfiel, who was gliding through the air, trajectory parallel to the ground, the giant and the woman dove forward in pursuit at the same time.

“__”

“__”

Garfiel: “Haarghh, ahhh!”

Garfiel was sandwiched between the two parallel attacks.

He met the sword swinging at him from the front with a shield, and used the other to block a giant sword at his back. With a forceful kick to the ground, he barely ducked escaped their cage

of attacks. A sword once again emerged from the fray, which he met with

both shields, sparks dancing along their surfaces, followed by a swing sweeping from top to bottom...

Garfiel: “GAH!!”

His bones and sternum cracked, and the power of the blow left Garfiel’s vision blood red.

Although he’d bore the brunt of that sword, its blunt blade had barely spared Garfiel’s life.

A cry of agony followed the blood spilling from his mouth as his body flew into a tower, barely avoiding the danger of being shattered to pieces. However, the two difficult enemies wouldn’t allow his survival.

“__”

Wordlessly, they cut at Garfiel.

Although the intensity of this strike couldn’t be compared with that of the previous one, the sharpness of the woman's sword as she called upon a power that should have been outside her scope was beautiful as it tangled with the breath of death. Even at this length, that calm, elegant blade would split him clean in half.

“__”

Also wordless, the giant’s battling style was brutal and crude.

However, that kind of brutality wasn't one that was impulsive and left to chance, it was the brutality of someone who could harness and optimize their destructive power. Most people would barely be able to hold one of his swords, but he easily swung two of them, each in one of his giant arms.

Garfiel: "Ah, ah, hah, ah, haaah!"

A violent whirlwind of steel sliced through the air, flowing like running water.

Although their styles were different, the effectiveness of their dynamic was commensurate with their overwhelming skill, and they attacked side by side, leaving the escaping Garfiel only able to desperately play the defense.

Desperately bouncing backwards on the stone steps, dodging a heavy swing, feeling a sharp wind whistle over his head broken under the wind, relying on the instinct to withstand attacks with his shields, dodging, bouncing, defending.

—But, if they kept at it, sooner or later, he would be beheaded.

"——"

"——"

The two figures pressed Garfiel, giving him nary a chance to breathe. Without that, he couldn't do anything about the shortage of oxygen in his brain, couldn't see any ray of hope. His every effort was directed toward avoiding a fatal injury.

When he'd exhausted himself, his attention would surely fail to keep up.

And his distracted self would suffer a fatal blow.

Masterful combat, masterful swings.

Tenacious as Garfiel's life was, they could easily and simply steal it away.

The more time passed, the more escape routes closed to him.

Decision. A decision was pressing.

The only way out of this dilemma was to reveal his true fangs. In that moment, Garfiel found the only advantage he could possibly hold.

And that thought briefly revived him.

He sought a breathing opportunity.

Garfiel: "—What..."

The woman's blades made deadly cuts. He brought both wrists forward to capture her, shifting his body the minimum distance to avoid the full impact of the giant's full attack.

As expected, the giant's hit cracked Garfiel's left shoulder, and the knee of his right leg was shattered. But, in exchange for a breath of fresh air, that damage was nothing.

Garfiel: “Kah, haah...”

“__”

“__”

With a raging roar, he released the heat boiling in his body.

The same feeling of boiling blood expanded to his field of vision, which became nothing but pure white, a cracking sound echoing from beneath his face as his bones shifted. His teeth elongated into fangs, and he exercised his arms as his muscles expanded rapidly, his body becoming covered with golden hair.

Only his upper body changed, leaving him in a half-beast state.

The smell of blood chased his rationality away momentarily, but, in this state, his thoughts weren't completely animalistic. Seeing the person in front of them beastify, it was impossible for any hostile party to remain calm.

“__”

Facing the two speechless figures, Garfiel growled, revelling in the idea of

shattering their eardrums, confirming that his nails had grown into thick, double-edged weapons. As the enemies' footsteps froze, he decided to open holes in their bodies.

His front paw descended toward the woman — until the form of giant man squeezed in front of her.

No matter. Even those thick muscles were nothing worth mentioning. They were but paper shields under his claws. And shielding was just what the giant intended to do — he held outstretched, the blade of his large sword facing down, making a gesture of neither defending nor attacking, but choosing to protect the woman.

Cute. But it was over.

— His paws would tear through the giant's body, followed by the slender form of the woman...

Garfiel: “—!?”

The process that had already been set in motion, but had been paused in the first motion.

Garfiel's tiger paw hit the giant, but failed to tear through him. That was because he'd caught Garfiel's paw in his own hands.

He'd uncover the front part of his robe to reveal his six arms.

With its strong arm, Garfiel was suppressed. His massive sword blocked Garfiel's claws sharply at the tip, and the violent attack was deflected downward.

—This was the Eight Arm defensive movement.

“——”

Too stunned to react, Garfiel hesitated.

He couldn't believe that the giant could stand up to his crushing blow.

That was also to say, in that moment, Garfiel had left himself exposed and completely unprepared.

“——”

From behind the giant's back, the woman swung behind at the unprepared half-beast and launched herself at him.

Garfiel's, covered by tiger's fur, was a sitting target for that woman waving her long sword.

As the tip of the sword approached, Garfiel felt the invisible breath of Death on his neck. However, his paws were captured by the giant's hands, all he could do was wait for Death—

Mimi: “Hold on a second!”

Garfiel: “— —”

Garfiel would have been split diagonally in half, had the woman's cut not been stopped by an unfolding blue magic barrier.

Her strike bounced into the barrier, which disappeared as she landed back on the ground.

The orange-haired kitten had saved Garfiel in the nick of time.

Mimi: “Garfiel, we promised that we’d flee immediately!”

For the first time, something like reproach colored Mimi’s voice.

In his half beast status, hearing the voice coming from behind, Garfiel’s rationality flew back into his head as he started to recognize his own stupidity.

Ignoring anxieties, being far too careless, having been too dismissive to his opponent, he’d landed himself in a dangerous situation. From that dead end, Mimi had rescued him.

Garfiel gulped as he appreciated the strength of Mimi’s barrier.

The violence in the woman’s blade didn’t match her appearance, and Mimi’s

defensive capabilities were really quite capable. Garfiel was incredibly fortunate that she was there.

Garfiel: “Hah, ah, ah, hahhh!”

Woman: “——”

Resting assured that he would be safe, Garfiel broke free of the giant’s grip by kicking backward from its body. Having realized the giant blocked Garfiel’s kick with its arm, Garfiel picked Mimi up by the waist and disengaged from the battle.

In this way, he would flee from here with Mimi. Following their original plan, they’d pick the fight back up with reinforcements.

Woman: “——”

Before they could move, the woman had quickly caught up. But once again, Mimi launched a barrier, this one larger than the previous one. The woman was again knocked back, and Garfiel gathered all his energy into his legs, preparing to escape.

— A breath. The figure of the woman stopped and gently cast a hand in front of the barrier. With a leap, she approached.

Garfiel: “What’s—!”

Mimi: “——”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

A small sound accompanied a gentle impact.

Unable to ascertain what had happened, Garfiel's stopped mid jump. As the stone steps flew past from under him, he saw a red line soar through the sky.

Blood. That's what it was.

Garfiel: “Midget...?”

The consciousness of maintaining his semi-beast form was interrupted, and Garfiel's rapidly changed back to human form. The sensation of losing his tiger fur was buried under a wave of chills.

His arms were exhausted, drained. He turned his gaze down. Looking up, he saw the flying figure of a woman whose blade whipped through the air.

More than half of that sword was coated with red, viscous blood.

A warm liquid dripped onto Garfiel's lower abdomen. Seeing Mimi's death grip on that wand she loved to use, even as she was rendered immobile from exhaustion, snapped Garfiel back into awareness.

Garfiel: “——”

Landing, jumping again. Continuing to leap to the nearby buildings, bearing the weight at his side as he fled. Fortunately, their adversaries didn't follow suit.

Were they uninterested in anything other than guarding the square, or was this a show of humanity? No matter, what should he do now? After four lengthy leaps away the square, Garfiel collapsed on a building, where he checked Mimi's condition.

Mimi's eyes closed, a large amount of blood spilling from the wound in her chest.

Garfiel yanked her clothes open to check on her wounds. He cautiously concluded that this wasn't yet a fatal injury. Of course, that didn't allow for any optimism. She was in need of immediate healing magic. He needed to calm himself.

Garfiel: “——”

Placing his hand on her wound, Garfiel willed all of the mana in his body into Mimi.

Garfiel was one of the few who could use healing magic in Sanctuary. He'd always felt that it was slightly useless, but, in the event of any emergency, he hoped to be able to do something. Therefore, Garfiel had poured all of his magical efforts into learning how to heal, and he had a rough but complete grasp on each field of healing.

As long as the injury wasn't fatal, he was fairly confident that he could do something.

Mimi's wounds needed all of his effort to heal. Sweat beaded his forehead as he mustered up his mana, directing it to suppress the overflow of blood and mend the cut skin, muscle, injured internal organs, desperately willing them to be fixed, giving her mana continuously. Continuously. Continuously.

—The wound wouldn't close.

Garfiel: "What... what...?"

Who was whispering in that soft voice?

Someone who could, in this situation, make that kind of soft sound deserved nothing but Garfiel's wrath. He glanced around wildly, looking for the source. There was no one there. Finally, he realized. That voice was his own. Aware of it. The voice is just my own.

So that soft voice had been him? Had he had that sound?

Such a sound was, was, was—

Garfiel: "Close, close, close, healhealheal...!"

Exhausted, he ordered all of the magic in his body into her treatment. The wave of healing magic flowed into her, filling her with a gentle current of mana.

In spite of this, the wound refused to close.

Garfiel: “—’S a lie, right?”

Unable to accept the reality facing him, Garfiel again muttered with a weak voice.

Immediately afterward, he hit himself in the face and bit down hard on his lip to keep himself grounded. Now was not the time to make such a soft voice. What could he do, what could he do?

What could he do, what could he do, what could he do, what could he do?

He had no idea. But he couldn’t give up here. This girl needed to be saved.

Because hadn’t she let Garfiel shed tears before her?

Such a child, who had tried to been hurt trying to save him, could not die like this.

Garfiel: “——”

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel began to run. One of his hands rested on the girl’s wound, trying again to staunch her bleeding with his ineffective magic.

The smell of blood, the smell of Death. In these deserted streets, any

thoughts about what might have happened were completely absent from Garfiel's mind.

Someone, anyone! Save this kid! Someone, anyone, bring a miracle! Tell me what to do! If there's anything I can do... what can be done to save her!?

Garfiel: "——"

Garfiel strengthened his sense of smell.

The smell of water, blood, high feelings, charred meat. In the midst of those foul scents, Garfiel found a very familiar smell brushing past, and immediately following it, running, running, continually, endlessly, running.

He flew into a shelter, seeing figures covered with bloodstains everywhere, and issued a sad sigh.

But he wasn't free to care at the moment. Opening his eyes, he searched for that figure. Searching, searching, searching...

Subaru: "Garfiel!?"

He found him.

In that deep, dark, cold underground facilities, he found the one who he had been desperately searching out.

Natsuki Subaru.

To Garfiel, that existence was miraculous, and, in any worst case possible, he was a ray of light, the last thing Garfiel could rely on.

Staggering pace. Head shaking.

Due to the weight of in hands and his choking lungs, Garfiel swayed back and forth.

As he approached, Subaru glanced around him, before becoming aware of the unconscious Mimi in his arms.

Under Subaru's gaze, Garfiel bowed his head, holding Mimi out, blindly cursing his own stupidity.

Garfiel: "Sorry, captain...! I'm so worthless...! Incompetent...!"

He'd been unable to protect that family, his vow to become a shield for their mission hadn't been achieved, his challenge to the hostile forces had been met with no results, and, in the end, this gentle girl was on the brink of death.

Subaru: "Garfiel, what happened... no, it's not the time for that. Ferris!"

Ferris: "I know! Hurry up, give that child to me!"

Reaching out, Mimi was taken from his arms, and placed in a bed near Subaru. Garfiel took a moment to try to sort through his thoughts.

In the next moment, a volatile healing energy overflowed, permeating the space. Garfiel simply couldn't compare. If Garfiel's healing prowess was likened to a drop of rain, Ferris would be a waterfall.

Witnessing the magic that could resurrect even a lost life, healing, Garfiel looked as if she had been drawn out of her soul, her face staring at her treatment.

Subaru gently placed a hand on Garfiel's slackened shoulder. With a glance, he could see that Subaru had endured an appalling injury to his foot.

Subaru: "Although I can't say that this went well, you did a great job bringing her to Ferris. Thanks to you, this child can be saved."

Garfiel: "Thanks to me...?"

What was Subaru saying?

Thanks to Garfiel, Mimi had saved? Ridiculous! Mimi was hurt so severely, at it was all Garfiel's fault.

Mimi's life should never have been in danger in that first place. That had all happened because of Garfiel's poor judgement.

Emptiness and twisted thinking, unsolvable thoughts of guilt, and self-conscious stupidity.

The world would never forgive Garfiel's foolishness.

He had made a mistake, and he would need to pay the price.

And still, the worst results were happening.

Subaru: "Ferris, what happened...?"

Feeling a change, Subaru's expression grew worried.

Subaru dragged himself over the the bed, questioning the man who was casting his potent healing spells.

In that terrifying torrent of magic, the healer shook his head.

Ferris: "Why...? The wounds, they won't heal...! If it goes on like this, I don't know if I can save her!"

His anguished cry echoed across the room, and Garfiel turned his face toward the sky.

But he was underground, and so the sky had nothing to tell Garfiel.

— The price of his mistake could be nothing but a repatriation by blood.

Chapter 32: The City Hall Raiders' Conference

Ferris: "Ah, really! Healing magic has no effect, so we can only use such a primitive treatment!"

Ferris, with blood staining his cheeks, clenched his teeth in irritation, waving a hand around.

Lying in front of him, blood still flowing from her chest, was Mimi's unconscious form.

Wholeheartedly wanting to stop the bleeding, he'd been forced to bind her wound with a magic cloth and several layers of bandages.

This was something typically used for hand and foot injuries, but it could also be applied to the chest to maintain a wound's closure and prevent bleeding. Only, Mimi's chest wound was just above her heart.

The amount of time she had left could only depend upon her own vitality.

Subaru leaned against the wall, watching desperate treatment as he fretted about Garfiel. Looking down, he saw that instead of looking at Mimi, Garfiel had plunged his bloody hands into his short blond hair and looked down, a far cry from his usual optimistic self.

The blood covering his body was not only Mimi's. It was plain to see that he had his own severe wounds. Blood stained the corners of his mouth, and the

amount of blood still pouring his shoulders was particularly heart-wrenching. His trousers were torn near his knees, where flesh was missing and white bone could be glimpsed.

Subaru: “Garfiel. Mimi can be entrusted to Ferris, for the time being. You also need treatment for your wounds. Can you administer healing spells yourself?”

Garfiel: “...ah, yeah.”

Nodding, Garfiel slowly pressed his palms to his wounds began to deliver the healing mana into his own body. As he watched the slowly healing wounds, Subaru looked down at the conversation mirror in his hand.

Reflected in the surface of the mirror was a silent old swordsman, his wrinkled face bearing a complex expression.

In the depths of his own heart, what kind of confusion had risen? Undoubtedly, Wilhelm must have reached the same conclusion as Subaru.

Subaru: “The wound can’t be closed, which is to say...”

Wilhelm: “In all likelihood, that’s because of the Divine Protection of the Shinigami.”

Finishing Subaru’s words, Wilhelm came to the expected conclusion.

The terrible curse of incurable healing of a wounds was given by the death

god's blessing.

That Mimi's wound couldn't be healed by magic was probably due to such a blessing.

Then, in Subaru's mind, only one person could conceivably have done this.

Of course, while it couldn't be asserted that no other person could possibly have the same divine protection,

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san. Although this isn't a happy thought... your wrist injury, how is it?"

Wilhelm: "—"

Wilhelm briefly closed his eyes, then removed his coat and presented his left hand to Subaru.

The bandage wrapped tightly against it bore no bloodstains. Then there was no bleeding— so his attacker couldn't be near.

Wilhelm: "Even assuming that the injury was given by someone who had the same protection as my wife, as long as my wounds have not opened, her life cannot be near. Although that should be a matter of course."

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san..."

Was he frustrated, or was he relieved? Subaru did not know.

Wilhelm had lost his wife a full fifteen years ago. Even one year ago, he'd certainly not doubted her death.

Regardless of the hopelessness of any situation, looking at a favored result with unconditional hope and choosing to believe in any modest hope was a weakness of humanity. However, even if Wilhelm succumbed to that weakness, Subaru found no shame in it whatsoever.

Therefore, at this moment, Subaru found no words he could say to Wilhelm who but of course desired neither casual comfort nor encouragement.

Behind Subaru, a change in the situation had occurred.

That was,

Ricardo: "Bro. Sorry, to take your time while you're treating a wound."

Saying so, Ricardo sat on the ground.

Near Ferris, desperately conducting his treatment, the beastman sat in front of the bloody Garfiel, eyeing him sharply.

To meet that gaze, Garfiel slowly raised his head.

Ricardo: "I don't know what happened. But I know that if bro hadn't brought her here, Mimi wouldn't have made it. So,"

Garfiel: "——"

Ricardo: "Really, thank you very much. I'm deeply grateful."

With two fists on the ground, Ricardo kneeled and bowed his head.

As Ricardo's forehead hit the ground, thanking Garfiel for bringing his family here, Garfiel appeared shocked.

Mimi's status was still not optimistic. It was understandable that Garfiel held some guilt for not being able to successfully defend Mimi. But that was by no means Garfiel's fault. What good what it do to blame him?

Ricardo had, of course, hoped for Mimi's safe return, and, having her back in that state, he couldn't have been calm.

Even so, in Subaru view, Ricardo's vaulted posture was completely sincere.

At the same time, he held an unforgiving anger at those who left Mimi in that state.

Therefore,

Subaru: "Garfiel. Although it must be troubling for you, tell me exactly what

happened. Even you're in such a state, which is unimaginable. Not to mention..."

As he asked Garfiel to explain the situation, an idea took root in Subaru's mind.

It was earlier, as he sorted through their information with Julius and Wilhelm, contemplating the siege of Pristella, the idea had briefly crossed his mind.

Seizing the five control towers, the Witch Cult had turned the entire city as their hostage.

Each location must have been occupied by a mighty force. Assuming that was right— they were most likely guarded by Wrath, Greed, Lust. Then, the likelihood of Gluttony's presence was also high.

——That Gluttony was precisely Subaru's target.

Greed, who had Emilia, and Wrath, who regarded Subaru as Petelgeuse. Lust, whose ugly nature he'd heard earlier, and Gluttony, the target he'd been hunting.

Although the situation was indeed the worst of the worst, at the same time, there had never been an opportunity better than now.

Being entrapped in a spider web was precisely the right time to exterminate all the spiders.

Subaru: “Anyway, we have attack these guys eventually. After all, if we don’t, we’ll never be able to return safe and sound.”

Subaru: “——”

Garfiel stared at him in surprise.

Subaru nodded with encouragement, urging him to speak.

Garfiel: “...After hearin’ that broadcast, my amazin’ self and th’midget went t’the center ‘f the city. Both ‘f us hated that broadcaster’s annoyin’ voice.”

Ricardo: “We were also discussing a way we were gonna do that. Looks like you got the first chance.”

Garfiel: “On th’way t’tha City Hall, th’were no sentries, n’no appearance ‘f anythin gettin’ our way. So my amazin’ self headed straight toward the City Hall, where...”

Garfiel’s words stopped, as he clenched his teeth, his fists trembling.

This was not fear, but anger. However, Subaru believed that that anger was directed not at his opponent, but at Garfiel himself.

Issuing a fiery, angry breath, Garfiel continued.

Garfiel: "Two enemies appeared. One of 'em was'n huge man th'lugged around two giant swords. Th'other was a thin woman'n had a slender sword. No matter what, 'f they was serious about it, they'd match me one on one. No... they'd most likely be stronger than my amazin' self."

Subaru: "Even stronger than you...was one of them the broadcaster?"

Garfiel: "...most likely not."

Subaru almost wondered whether or not there was a problem with his ears.

Garfiel was not only the strongest in Emilia' faction, who was meant to face the Witch Cult if the need ever arose, he also sat at the peaks of strength in their combined forced.

That Garfiel had just judged two people to be individually stronger than himself. And, if his assumption was right, those people were only common cultists.

Garfiel: "Those two didn't give off th'same malice as th'broadcast. Even though my amazin' self left openin's while I escaped, we still got away... they seem t'of some kind 'f swordsman's etiquette or whatever."

Garfiel regarded his opponents with something like awe.

Unlike his usual lively self, he seemed to be in a sluggish state, clearly still affected by Mimi's state.

Ricardo, who had been listening to Garfiel, slapped his knees with dull sound and stood. Then he grabbed Garfiel's shoulder,

Ricardo: “Strong or not strong, I can already clearly tell. What I want to know is, who left bro in such a state? Who did that the Mimi? Who should I seek revenge on? Tell me that.”

Garfiel: “... My amazin’ self’s wounds are mostly from th’guy, while the woman was a distraction. However, because’f that woman, Mimi...”

Wilhelm: “—that woman, could you please leave her to me?”

Ricardo was ignited by the vengeance for Mimi, and Garfiel swore that same goal, with shame.

The one who had interjected was Wilhelm, who had been listening silently through the mirror.

To him, too, this was by no means something he could leave alone.

But it was cruel to the two who didn’t know about Wilhelm’s reasons.

Ricardo: “Why? This has nothing to do with you, Wilhelm-san. Even you shouldn’t take my right to have revenge on those that harmed my dear family.”

Wilhelm: “I... can’t say for certain without having confirmation. However, if what I suspect is true, than that woman is a very important one to me. I must

insist.”

Ricardo: “That's... if you anger me, I won’t be able to spare you.”

Although Ricardo snarled in agitation, Wilhelm also stubbornly refused.

Precisely because he understood the situation of both sides, Subaru couldn’t determine who was right. Therefore, it wasn’t Subaru who drew an end to that quarrel, but,

Crusch: “—Wilhelm. And Ricardo-sama. Now, as companions, this is not for strife. Not when so many civilian lives are exposed to danger.”

Wilhelm: “Crusch-sama...”

With a cool voice, filled with fortitude, Crusch scolded the two.

At the reproof of his master, Wilhelm bowed and scratched his head in shame.

In the meantime, considering options that would avoid internal strife,

Anastasia: “Okay, okay. Let's make a decision.”

Clapping gently, Anastasia took the mirror and pointed at Subaru.

Laughing at the timid Subaru, Anastasia fiddled with her fox scarf,

Anastasia: “First of all, I want to bring up the raid on the City Hall proposed by Natsuki-kun and supported by Crusch-san’s faction. After all, if we attack any of the control towers, that City Hall’ll give everything away for us. And even if it isn’t retaken, the situation of the waterways could be improved a little bit, yeah? Although that might just be a bit of my wishful thinking.”

Subaru: “No, I’m thinking the same thing. Moreover, if the other side launches an attack first, it’ll cut our choices down. If we want to act, the sooner the better.”

Anastasia: “...what’s this, you’ve become reliable in this past year, haven’t you? In any case, it’s just as Natsuki-kun’s said. Thanks to the conversation mirror, our groups can collaborate, and, fortunately, about 70% of our total combat power can be dispatched immediately. It’d be reasonable to say that an attack on the City Hall would fare well, yeah?”

Subaru glanced at Garfiel and Ricardo.

In order to conquer the City Hall in one fell swoop, it would become necessary to split their combat forces.

A raid on the City Hall would entail, in their current situation, deploying forces from the closest shelter, Garfiel and Ricardo. Then, from other the shelter, Julius and Wilhelm would come.

Members of the Iron Fang, as well with both Ton and Kan, and the numerous adventurers who were staying in the city. Adding them to their ranks would

improve their combat effectiveness.

Subaru: “Honestly, if Reinhard were here, everything would be fine... could we get Ton and Kan to summon him?”

Julius: “It’s strange that we haven’t located him, is that what you’re thinking?”

Julius, in response to Subaru’s attempt to maximize their combat power, shifted his gaze toward him.

Julius: “Before entering the shelter, the two seemed to have fired magic into the sky as a signal. However, Reinhard, who should have appeared instantly, didn’t appear. And, this isn’t a pleasant thought, but...”

Subaru: “But what? Really, are you still hesitating at this point?”

Julius: “Then, I welcome you to feel the same trepidation that I do. —Felt-sama’s followers were separated from her and Reinhard a little bit before all this happened. It seems that they were last seen speaking to a red-haired man.”

Subaru: “Red-haired man... that couldn’t be that damn bastard, could it?”

Julius: “I can neither confirm nor deny this.”

Subaru gritted his teeth indignantly while listening Julius’s elegant answer.

Felt and Reinhard had met, if Subaru's speculation were right, Reinhard's father, Heinkel. What would the two have to say to that man?

And now, why weren't they taking action?

Subaru: "However, he showed up at Sirius's speech in that previous loop... What's the difference? Is it because of the broadcast? Has he taken action already?"

Which one after the last is what conditions are different, and Subaru can not clearly know the difference.

In any case, knowing that they couldn't count on Reinhard to show up was a cause for alarm.

Subaru's shoulders dropped in contemplation. Meanwhile, Ferris had returned.

His feminine costumes were black blood stained, and full of sweaty faces,

Ferris: "Huu. That took quite a while."

Ricardo: "So, how's Mimi's condition? Is she fine? Did you save her?"

As Ferris wiped his forehead of sweat, Ricardo questioned breathlessly. And Garfiel, from behind him, also cast him a panicked gaze without standing up.

However, at their sincere eyes, Ferris shook his head ruthlessly.

Ferris: "I can't say that I've saved her, but the wound isn't getting worse. That's all thanks to her brothers right nyow. By strengthening their link, she's barely managing to hold on."

Ricardo: "That's their Divine Protection of Triplets, right? In that case, what'll happen to the brothers?"

Ferris: "Their blessing is mean to have three children share the burden of fatigue and injury.

Their link strengthening allows the brothers to share the injuries of their seriously injured sister. In that case, although her life can be prolonged..."

Tivey: "—When sister's life is exhausted, we'll die too, right?"

From the mirror, a pained voice echoed forth.

Ricardo frowned and took the conversation mirror, which reflected Hetaro and Tivey, sitting side by side. The two brothers were also clutching their chests in pain.

Ricardo: "You guys are idiots. Really, just a group of hopeless idiots."

Hetaro: "...However, when I think that this is sister's pain, knowing that we're feeling the same pain together makes me a little happier."

Tivey: "I'm not as strong as my brother. So, Chief. I believe that you'll be able to do something for us soon. Because if I die, I'll become a ghost and haunt you."

Being assigned to aid the injury suffered by their sister, the two brothers experienced the same serious injury.

Seeing Hetaro and Tivey lying side by side in their shelter, Ricardo gave a deep breath sigh and took his machete in hand.

Then,

Ricardo: "...in other words, we have to move quickly, then. If we don't there's no point."

Ricardo whispered in a deep voice that emanated his passionate feelings.

Anastasia: "Send the Iron Fang out and have them secure the road until you reach the City Hall. Then have our best break into the building itself, and try to seize it in one fell swoops. The enemies are the huge man and slender woman. Following them should probably be lust."

Subaru: "The elites here are Garfiel and Ricardo. Then Wilhelm-san and Julius."

Crusch: "—I'm going too."

Those words came from Crusch, who had tied her hair into a ponytail.

She stood with sword in hand, having shed her dress for armor suited for battle.

Subaru: “Crusch-san, by saying you’ll go, you mean that you can fight?”

Crusch: “Although I’m not as strong as I was before, I’ve had Wilhelm as a teacher. In addition, I can use the Wind to augment my strikes. I don’t intend to be a burden.”

Crusch’s power, before losing her memory, was enough that her individual presence had made a difference in the battle of the White Whale. However, the strength of the current amnesiac Crusch was unknown to Subaru.

Honestly speaking, Subaru had thought that her newfound femininity had led to a seeming loss in her adaptability to the struggle.

Wilhelm: “Crusch-sama’s talent with the sword has not declined. That, I can guarantee.”

Wilhelm’s words wiped away the last of Subaru’s discomfort. The old swordsman nodded, gazing through the mirror at his master’s side.

Wilhelm: “However, please be careful. I implore you, please place your safety first.”

Crusch: “It’s the obligation of the nobility to bear burden of and shed blood for the people. If innocent people weep, then I will shield them under my wing. I will fight, Wilhelm.”

Wilhelm: “...honestly. But, it’s because of this that I offer you my sword.”

Crusch spoke resolutely toward Wilhelm’s allegiance. Ferris raised his hand as he watched, face full of admiration.

Ferris: “Yes! Yes! Ferri-chan too! If Crusch-sama will fight, then please let Ferri-chan accompany you! Please!”

Crusch: “Ferris travelled between shelters to cast healing spells on those in need. I’m very proud of your contributions. But don’t mistake which battlefield you should be fighting on.”

Ferris: “Gah...”

Silenced in that manner, Ferris bowed his head, searching for any retaliation. Unable to find one, he raised a white flag with a tearful expression.

Ferris: “Wil-jii. Definitely do a good job protecting Crusch-sama, okay? Absolutely absolutely.”

Wilhelm: “Mmm, I understand. Even if my own life is in danger, even if it burns out — I will do so.”

That was Wilhelm's answer to that trust, full of tragic determination.

Ricardo waved his sword gently, and Garfiel finished his own treatment and stood with his back leaning against the wall.

Through the mirror, Wilhelm stood with sword at his waist, and Julius wore his knight's uniform leisurely.

This was the dawn of the decisive battle — which would also include Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "Gah, ugh, ahh...!"

Ferris: "S-Su-Subaru-kyun! What are you doing!?"

Biting his molars to endure the pain in his right leg, Subaru finally climbed to his feet.

Ferris, flushed in fury, slapped Subaru upside the head, glaring at his foot, which was still missing skin and muscle.

Subaru: "Ferris, that hurt!"

Ferris: "Of course it did! I've obviously said that you absolutely need rest, so what possessed you to try to get up? Do you want your feet to rot off?"

Subaru: "Even if it's torn off, there are still things that I have you do. Ferris,

you should understand my feelings. Do you think I can really stay here obediently and wait for results?”

Ferris: “...Muu.”

Ferris raised a hand to his mouth as Subaru pressed on.

Sending his companions to a place where survival was unlikely, then waiting for results. Subaru could never endure such a thing. If, by running around, he could come up with some clever idea and help someone, how could he lie here?

Subaru: “You can fight like this. Well, I must fight too. Beatrice protected me, and Emilia’s in danger from Greed. In this state, you want me to retreat?”

Ferris: “...is that to say that you won’t regret losing your foot?”

Subaru: “Of course I’m bound to regret it. But I’d regret not fighting more.”

Ferris: “Heh... then, Subaru-kyun also wants to play a cool role.”

With an exhausted expression, Ferris held a hand to his forehead.

After that, he pressed his hand to the wound on Subaru’s leg.

Ferris: “What I’ll be doing now is giving you a bit of solace!”

Subaru: “Solace is... ah, wait a minute, Ferris-san. The injury kinda hurts, so rubbing back and forth like that is going to really hurt...?”

His hands on the wound, Ferris ravaged Subaru’s leg — was what should have happened, but, instead, a brilliant line shone from the injury, ending the pain which had been piercing through it like a sharp blade.

Subaru, shocked at the effects of that magic, looked Ferris in the face. Then,

Ferris: “You look murderous!?”

Subaru: “No, no! Although, if you have such convenient magic, don’t be so reluctant to give it to sooner! This is great, I can move!”

As Ferris’s sharp tongue bit into him Subaru jumped lightly with his right leg. While enjoying the joy of his new freedom of motion, he began to dance in place. Pain was no longer a problem.

His palm hit the wound with a smack as he celebrated the amazing change. Then, Subaru looked down, feeling something sticky and wet. His hands were covered in red, and his foot’s wound had ruptured.

Subaru: “Hey, hey, hey!? Didn’t you heal it!?”

Ferris: “I nyever said I healed it. I just asked if you’d regret it if you lost your leg. Ferri-chan removed the pain from touch. As long as you’re careful, you can keep your leg if you limit your running around.”

Subaru's bleeding legs shook as Ferris re-bandaged the wound and cast fresh spells. The blood stopped; however, Subaru felt even more uncomfortable, realizing that he could feel nothing from his leg.

It was similar to anesthesia, but he didn't feel quite as sluggish. Aside from not being able to feel touch, his right leg's actions were almost normal.

However, pain itself is a necessity to avoid destroying one's own body. For the sake of convenience those sensations have been revoked, but,

Ferris: "Of course, I'm doing this reluctantly. When we meet back up, there will definitely be some residual effects. I want to see that they'll be very slight, so be careful!"

Subaru: "...understood. You've been a great help, I'm grateful."

Ferris: "...Subaru-kyun is absolutely, certainly planning to ignore Ferri-chan's words."

Ferris sighed as Subaru reexamined his leg while nodding.

Although he'd like to say something like "I'd never do such a thing", if the situation arose, he couldn't promise that he'd comply with Ferris.

Unable to make any promises, Subaru could only thank him once more before heading back toward Garfiel and Ricardo.

Subaru: “Right, I’m coming too. It’s useless to try to stop me. I don’t think I’ll be too much help in combat, but there must be something I can do...”

Ricardo: “Why would I stop you? You’d bring with you the strength of a hundred men. I’ll be counting on you.”

Subaru: “I can do things like... huh?”

Although he had been waiting for a rejection, he had been eagerly welcomed into the party.

Subaru wondered what in the world was happening as the beastman opened his mouth.

Ricardo: “The White Whale, and Sloth. Both times, I saw your efforts for myself, bro. You’d be wrong if you think only Wilhelm sees your value. I also see someone worthy of praise.

Subaru: “Really, truly?”

Inspired by Ricardo’s words, Subaru invited himself in without any problem.

Before leaving the shelter, Subaru approached Beatrice's bed and gently touched the forehead of that quietly sleeping girl.

Subaru: “Beatrice, I'll be going out. I messed up and left you like this, so now it’s my turn to work hard. I’ll take care of that cult and take back Emilia. You just stay here and rest well.”

Beatrice: “— —”

Silence. Comforted by her peaceful breathing, Subaru stood up.

Meanwhile, Garfiel and Ricardo spoke to Mimi, who looked miserable as she lay unconscious. Although she also gave no response, the two men showed an opposite expression, a strong determination that they would pour into conquering yet unknown territory.

Subaru: “We’ll leave the shelter and join up at the large waterway leading to the City Hall. —So, cheer up, alright?”

Before their departure, everyone exchanged glances, determination fueled by their respective oaths, fierce momentum propelling them onward.

The war to regain Pristella would commence with a central attack on the City Hall.

The two swordsmen in their may, and the Sin Archbishop of Lust.

Inscribing those targets in their minds, the soldiers marched toward the battlefield.

Chapter 33: Stratagem on the City Hall

— The silent Pristella's siege had, up until now, seemed to be naught but a fanciful story. Walking atop of the stone slab, Subaru glimpsed the flowing waterway.

The water running within was clear and pollution-free. Even now, it flowed on in its constant, well established path. The mechanism which split the flow between left and right was still alive and well. As long as the floodgates resumed, anyone could believe that the peril the city was under was little more than a nightmare.

Garfiel: "Captain, y'can't drag ya feet, y'know."

Subaru: "I know, I know. The danger levels that the City Hall Raiders face increases by 10% every second."

Ricardo: "In that case, we're doomed after the eleventh second aren't we? Well, that's probably true, actually."

Garfiel, who had taken the lead, narrowed his eyes as Ricardo's voice rang out through the air.

However, the beastman's expression wasn't in the least discouraged.

Carrying his sharp machete, he strode forward with vigorous steps, but not even his cavalier attitude was enough to relieve Garfiel's tension and guilt.

Ricardo looked no different from usual, while Garfiel had clearly discarded his usual demeanor.

Even so, three people who Ricardo considered family were hurt, and he couldn't be in a calm state of mind right now. This had been made clear back in the shelter.

On the other hand, Garfiel's self-confidence and recklessness had vanished and what remained was a cautious and more timid attitude, a change that emitted an ominous message.

Subaru: "...well, I can't say that I'm any better off, either."

It wasn't only those two who couldn't maintain their usual state of mind.

Subaru's own injured condition, Beatrice's unconsciousness, and, most importantly, Emilia's safety; all of those weighed heavily on his mind.

Even if he focused only on seeking a speedy revenge, experience had taught him that doing so would hasten a terrible result.

This was the philosophy of the group, the City Hall Raiders, who were striving for the best possible result.

Having encountered no cultists along the way, they successfully arrived at the rendezvous point. And there,

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono!”

Subaru: “It’s great to see you’re all safe.”

The forms of Wilhelm and Crusch drew near, as well as Julius, who elegantly stroked his hair.

Julius: “I’m sure you’re worried out of your mind for Emilia-sama, are you sure it’s okay for you to be here instead?”

Subaru: “In terms of overall priority, being here is more important, but I’m still anxious. But I don’t know anything about Emilia’s situation, and I can’t do anything that might jeopardize her even further.”

Julius: “I understand. Were Anastasia-sama placed in the same situation, I doubt I’d be able to remain calm.”

After nodding in response to his concerned words, Subaru turned to Wilhelm.

The old swordsman exercised his arms with his eyes closed, warming up his body.

How turbulent his mind might have been at that moment... was beyond Subaru’s understanding.

However, as if sensing Subaru’s gaze, Wilhelm opened his eyes, and reached into his coat. He withdrew a mirror and handed it to Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono, this is the conversation mirror. In the heat of battle, I doubt I’ll have any leeway to operate it, so I’ll leave it to you.”

Subaru: “Understood. Let’s move as planned.”

Placing the mirror carefully in his pocket, Subaru straightened his back.

He’d been entrusted with the responsibility of establishing conversation with the other two groups.

Subaru, who would be engaged in the least fighting, held one mirror, while the other was held by Ferris, who’d been travelling between shelters. The last one was held by Anastasia, who served as their source of intelligence.

Ideally, these three would be able to work together.

Crusch: “Then, to confirm again. We are moving to the battlefield identified by Garfiel-sama, where two demons are guarding the City Hall. One is a giant with two broadswords, and the other is a woman with a slender longsword, is that right?”

Garfiel: “Yep, ‘s right. Neither of them’re just common swordsmen. Even‘f they wasn’t fightin’ seriously, I’d prob’ end up sliced’n two by any one‘f ‘em.”

Going over all of their information once again, Crusch was the first to speak again.

Nodding at Garfiel's response, she turned back to Julius and Wilhelm.

Crusch: "The City Hall is occupied by Lust and those two. I imagine that others cultists will make an appearance there as well. Have either of you heard much about Lust?"

Julius: "My apologies. Even as a member of the knights, my knowledge is scant. Sloth and Greed are much more famous, but both of those have been encountered by Subaru."

Halfway through speaking, Julius had turned to Subaru. Subaru nodded, saying,

Subaru: "Although, having seen Greed for myself, I don't believe that rgw stories about him are untrue. But... that empire. He took out it's strongest knight? That seems a little suspicious. He's

strong, but, in terms of combat prowess, even I could match him. Although, he can negate any attack..."

Ricardo: "And that wasn't due to your own combat strength?"

Subaru: "Not this time. Although Wrath engulfed Greed with flames, it didn't hurt him in the slightest. His clothing was untouched. He didn't even break a sweat."

Regulus's power could easily be called invincibility.

How convenient. If that were true, then the City Hall Raiders would eventually be forced to face the worst of enemies. Although he wanted to believe that such an unreasonable power couldn't exist.

Subaru: "Obviously, we'd been in trouble in Greed were here, but we shouldn't have to worry about that..."

Julius: "Reinhard would never be absent when innocent civilians are in such danger. I think perhaps that he is facing a problem that leaves him unable to move. Like us, he's possibly caught in an encounter with other cultists."

Only Julius seemed to understand what was passing through Subaru's mind at the moment.

Prior to the start of all this, Felt and Reinhard had come into contact with Heinkel. He could only hope that the obnoxious idea which had taken root in his mind when he'd heard about their meeting was wrong.

Subaru: "Other than that, there's something that I want to confirm. The name Lust gave, Capella Emerada Lugunica. Why would she possibly call herself a Lugunica?"

Ricardo: "She had to be mocking us. Every member of the royal family is well known."

Crusch: "It still might not be misinformation. It seems too early to dismiss it as just a prank."

Ricardo and Crusch gave Subaru their differing opinions.

The Witch Cult being what it was, either possibility was worth considering. The poor character of this Lust could be clearly heard in her voice. A prank, as Ricardo had said, was likely indeed, but she could also prove to be an enigma.

However, in the face of those two proposals, Wilhelm raised a hand.

Wilhelm: "I do recall one thing."

Subaru: "What is it?"

Wilhelm: "Although I don't know of any Capella, I have heard a little about the reputation of Emerada Lugunica. That doesn't mean that there's any direct connection... but there was indeed someone named Emerada in the history of the royal family of Lugunica."

Subaru: "——!"

Surprised by this, Surabu's eyes grew wide as Wilhelm pondered with his hand to his chin.

Wilhelm: "Her name traces back to before the Demi-Human War, before I joined the army. So around 50 years ago. At the time, Emerada-sama was known as someone very beautiful and very clever."

Subaru: "And Lust called herself Emerada? For what reason?"

Wilhelm: “As for her intentions, I don’t know either. Only, I’ve heard that Emerada-sama passed away due to disease at a young age. But... a state funeral was never held in her honor.

Neglecting to hold a funeral for the death of a royal was practically unthinkable.

Tilting his head, Wilhelm frowned as he attempted to explain.

Wilhelm: “Times were hard, was the reason that they gave. However, the real reason was that the people didn’t want one for her.”

Subaru: “The people didn’t...?”

Wilhelm: “Although Emerada was very beautiful and very intelligent, she was... extremely cruel, with an immeasurable amount of darkness within her. Therefore, even the royal family of Lugunica regarded her as... a heretic, a fact hidden from the public.”

With only an unconfirmed testimony, saying such dubious words about the kingdom he served had probably left a bitter taste on Wilhelm’s tongue. His words had begun to waver in the second half of his explanation.

And everyone had seen for themselves Lust’s harsh nature. Subaru: “So Lust gave Emerada’s name... but for what purpose...”

Wilhelm: “If they’re trying to slander the royal family of Lugunica, the name of Emerada won’t be too significant. Hardly anyone remembers her these days.”

The result of Wilhelm’s conclusion was a sigh of relief.

Unlike the likes of Subaru, Garfiel, and Ricardo, there were those who loyally served the kingdom; Crusch, Wilhelm, and Julius’s feelings were unfathomable.

Such ungrateful, vicious ridicule toward the royal family was certainly not permissible.

Subaru: “In spite of that... Capella...”

Julius: “Any thoughts on that name?”

Julius turned his attention sharply as he spoke, seeing Subaru, who showed a bitter expression. Subaru: “Nothing, it’s just...”

After a brief pause, Subaru scratches his head as he continues.

Subaru: “It's not just Capella. Regulus, and Sirius too. And come to think of it, even Petelgeuse... but to say that’s this is meaningful is impossible.”

Garfiel: “Cut th’crap Captain ‘n tell us already. What’s so special ‘bout their names?”

Subaru: “It’s strange, you know? It’s just, you could kinda say that they have

the same names as the stars of my hometown, or something like that.”

Crusch: “Name of the stars, is it?”

Subaru: “Come to think of it, my name, Subaru, is as well. No, it doesn’t matter. It’s a stupid thought.”

In response to Subaru, Crusch widened her eyes, looking deeply interested.

Seeing that everyone else shared her reaction, Subaru scratched his head.

Subaru: “Don’t give much strange looks, okay? My hometown named all the stars, and the archbishops just happened to share their names. I quite enjoy learning about the stars and their stories, so I know some extra details.”

Crusch: “Really, that interest doesn’t seem to be in accordance with you. Stars, huh.”

Subaru: “My name, Subaru, also comes from the stars. That’s why. Sorry if it’s boring.”

Feeling embarrassed, Subaru neglected to delve into the details.

However, Crusch rejected Subaru’s attempts to end the conversation.

Crusch: “Please wait, Subaru-sama. Are their names really coincidentally the

names of your stars?”

Subaru: “What do you mean?”

Crusch: “For example, could the names of the stars Subaru-sama knows be the roots of their names? From the reason of their founding to the activities they carry out, everything about the Witch Cult is shrouded in many layers of mystery. We can’t easily discard something that they may share a connection with.”

Subaru: “——”

Subaru, although surprised at the Crusch’s unexpected questioning, was still lost in his own thoughts.

Really, Subaru had always believed that the star related names had been mere coincidence. Why? This was, after all, a different world. There would be no one else here who shared the knowledge of Subaru’s stars.

But could he say so for certain?

In this very place, Pristella, Subaru had bore witness to Japanese architecture. And deeply rooted in Kararagi’s culture, even reflected in the Kansai dialect, was Japanese influence, perhaps from Hoshin’s own hand.

Perhaps the establishment of the Witch Cult’s ideologies had some root in modern knowledge known to Subaru. The archbishops being named after stars wasn’t necessarily unrelated.

Subaru: “Petelgeuse. Regulus. Sirius. Capella...”

Julius: “Correct. Subaru said those were the names of stars. Are there any stories or anecdotes behind them? Maybe there’s a connection somewhere.”

Subaru: “Thinking along those lines...”

He dug through the thinning memories from his original world, finally recalling what he knew of the stars.

He’d once deeply loved celestial illustrations. Knowing that the origin of his name existed in the stars, Subaru had greedily immersed in drawings of constellations and had engraved a number of stars into his mind.

And, associated with the name of those abominable sinners,

Subaru: “The underarm of Orion, or the hand of Orion...”

Crusch: “Eh?”

Hearing the word underarm in a place she never would have imagined, Crusch tilted her head to the side.

However, Subaru didn’t register her reaction, gripping and shaking her slender shoulders, as he approached.

Subaru: “That’s right! It’s called the hand of Orion!”

Crusch: “Su-Subaru-sama? What... is this hand?”

Subaru: “Petelgeuse... the origin of his name is a star. His authority was the Unseen Hand, and that star’s other name is the hand of Orion!”

It was almost laughably far-fetched.

But were they only related by chance? Were this merely an amusing coincidence of symbolism?

Not Petelgeuse, but a star named Betelgeuse— that was a familiar name to Subaru. The small mismatch had been the reason he hadn’t yet noticed it.

Subaru: “Sirius is ‘shining’, and she can use fire magic, that’s not subtle at all. At most it’s a literal... Regulus is the ‘little king’. Isn’t that exactly like that bastard’s self-centered values!? Then, Capella is...!”

Crusch: “Capella is...?”

Subaru: “Little goat! A goat! Capella’s a goat!”

Digging through his memory, Subaru searched for some meaning relationship between the mythos of the stars and the archbishops of sin.

A smirk emerged on Subaru’s face, as if he were saying “not bad, not bad”.

Instead, listening to the Plewon's answer, Curim kept his brow pressed down while holding his shoulder. Then she looked to the other four people, they are also a complex expression,

Julius: “Orion’s hand?”

Wilhelm: “Shining?”

Ricardo: “Small king?”

Garfiel: “The hell’s a ‘little goat’?”

Subaru: “—Ah?”

At the reaction of the four people who turned their heads to, Subaru finally realized that his discovery was far more useless than he’d thought.

Crusch: “Subaru-sama, I apologize. It seems my thoughts led us astray.”

Yes, even Crusch looked sorry.



The correlation of the symbolism of the stars and the archbishops' names had failed spectacularly.

However, they had no time to waste lamenting that failure before launching a lightning-fast operation.

As a result, they attacked after they shared and discussed their abilities and combat styles.

The members of the Iron Fang, who had accompanied Julius and Crusch, went forth as a scouting force, ensuring that the way to the City Hall was clear. The six of them

would arrive safely.

Garfiel: "Ya, 's just like last time, nothin's changed..."

Nose twitching, Garfiel confirmed the lack of any new enemy presences.

According to what he had said, after crossing the straight road ahead, he had been ambushed as he'd prepared to enter the City Hall. But neither Garfiel's nose nor Subaru's eyes found the silhouettes he had mentioned.

If they weren't here, they could just directly take the City Hall and move on. Just as Subaru wanted to celebrate a lack of enemies,

Garfiel: “——”

Garfiel equipped his shields and Ricardo held his machete in a battle ready stance. Wilhelm, on the other hand, watched the plaza with the calmness of a tranquil lake.

For those three, this battle would likely turn out to be rather personal.

In particular, Wilhelm surely had much he needed to confirm.

Julius: “This area is completely open. Although my quasi-spirits have been sent to patrol it, they found no path we could sneak along. It seems that our only option is to approach directly.”

Julius had sent his spirits to scout out their surroundings. The geography of this location was difficult to launch an attack on and likewise difficult to defend.

Subaru: “Can’t you send your spirits inside to scout? Just knowing how many enemies there are and the building’s general layout would make our job that much easier.”

Julius: “Apologies, but my friends are still unable to perform an order that complicated. And the enemy isn’t necessarily unable to detect the presence of spirits, so that would be difficult.”

Subaru: “That wouldn’t be your fault. Still, that’s a shame, it would have been really helpful.”

Not knowing the circumstances of the City Hall itself again increased the danger of a direct attack.

That said, waiting would only cause the situation to worsen. Although the Witch Cult had claimed they were willing to negotiate over their broadcast, that was, in reality, extremely unlikely.

Subaru: “Then, just as we planned. Although the enemy has combat effectiveness, we have strength in numbers. It’s basically three on one for each of us. We’ll handle this quickly, and then get rid of the guy who’s occupying this place!”

Julius: “Although that’s optimistic thinking, I look forward to our success.”

Julius gave a wry response to Subaru's speech, and the party took off.

Without needing a signal, they ran up the straight road, toward the plaza in front City Hall.

Holding their breaths, they waited for their enemies to surface.

Garfiel ran in the lead, followed by Wilhelm and Julius. Ricardo followed them, and Crusch and Subaru held the rear.

His right leg felt, for all intents and purposes, fine. Although it was in a strange state of feeling no sensations, he could run without hindrance.

Garfiel: “—They’re here!”

Two figures fell upon Garfiel, who stood in the lead.

As the group watched the large blades and slender sword flutter in the air, a soldier among them courageously drew her own weapon. From the rear,

—The Hundred Man Strike was unleashed.

Crusch had drawn her sword, and, augmented with wind magic, unleashed a strike that cut toward the enemy.

Anything within her field of vision, even at great distance, could be struck by her. This was Crusch’s long range swordplay.

Her strikes had even made a dent in the White Whale’s magically enhanced defenses.

The sound of steel on steel rang out, and the giant and woman whirled away.

Subaru: “Did you get them?”

Crusch: “No, they deflected it!”

Her well placed surprise attack had failed to make contact.

While swinging their bodies to the side, landing neatly on the stone, the two figures, dressed in black, drew their respective weapons in a well prepared defensive formation.

Two giant blades, and a single sharp sword. From top to bottom, they were indeed both clad in the despicable garb of the witch cult.

Appearing to have completely brushed off the impact of that blow, they tilted their bodies forward slightly, about to kick off from the ground.

However, before that,

Julius: “Although you defended against Crusch-sama’s blow, can you take this?”

Three different colors glowed from above, the light emitted by the spirits pouring down upon the cultists.

Julius’s six quasi-spirits, working in groups of three, attacked the giant and woman. Another light of magic, which Subaru had never seen before, applied an appalling pressure to their enemies, forcing them to kneel.

Against the unbearable pressure of their enemies, Garfiel and Wilhelm rushed the woman, while Ricardo swung his blade over his head as he pounced toward the giant.

Garfiel: “Take this!”

Wilhelm: “Haah—!”

Ricardo: “It’s over!”

In a flash of silver, emanating an overwhelming pressure, the Sword Demon took off.

Garfiel and Wilhem’s inhuman strength struck downward, ready to split the enemy’s defenses open.

If they could strike a kill at this interval—

Woman: “——”

The kneeling woman turned her sword in her grip and slashed at Garfiel and Wilhelm’s legs. They immediately dodged but the woman followed with the same trajectory, twisting to stretch

a leg around Garfiel’s neck, moving him into the scope of Julius’s magic.
Garfiel: “Wha—”

Swaddled in Garfiel's arms, the woman protected herself from any magical effects using Garfiel as a shield. Then, her knee shattered Garfiel's nose as she grabbed his left arm with her free hand and used him as a shield against Wilhelm.

At this profound display of skill, Garfiel cried out in pain, while Wilhelm cursed.

Breaking their stalemate, she kicked at the old swordsman, releasing Garfiel in the process.

Although her movements should have been constrained, her blow was powerful enough to send Wilhelm flying. Just as he regained his balance, she had already made another half turn on the spot, delivering a swift follow up kick.

Giant: “——”

Meanwhile, Ricardo’s attack stopped short of the giant’s head.

Still kneeling due to the magical effects cast by Julius, the giant had readily discarded the big swords he had held in both hands. Then, he lifted his unguarded hands and brought them over his head.

Ricardo: “Idiot, you’re finished!”

As a result of his flawed judgment, his arms would be severed.

Even though Ricardo’s machete was blunt, it contained incredible momentum and power. The giant's thick arms were amputated by the impact of the blow and his upper arms flew through the air as red and and white bone spewed forth.

Giant: “——”

Ricardo stepped back and swept his machete up, aiming to bring it down upon the giant's enormous head.

However, the giant simply retrieved his swords with his extra arms, deflecting the coming blow that should have been fatal.

Ricardo: "What!?"

The giant then raised his arms, allowing a curtain of blood to spray forth, dispelling magic that Julius had cast. Now freed of that magic, the giant was again capable of the agile action that betrayed his enormous form. Having chosen to forego his arms he was able to do away with an even more crippling weakness.

Ricardo, unable to withstand the heavy blades that followed, had his arm caught by a blow as he barely managed to retreat from far worse.

He groaned as the giant's fist collided with his face, sending the beastman's burly body flying backward.

Woman: "——"

Giant: "——"

Against the three opponents who were now on the defensive, the woman and giant raised their weapons, weapons of special kind, with clear intent to kill.

Finally having caught up with those other three,

Julius: “Fell Goa!”

Julius’s incantation ushered in a wind, which swirled with red flames sprouting from within.

The resulting tornado of flame swiftly met the approaching woman, chasing her away from Garfiel and catching her in its wake.

Then, with a sound almost like a prayer, the sound of a slash and the whistle of a whip cut through the air.

Crusch’s blade of wind coupled with a strike of Subaru’s whip struck the giant’s body. His huge form finally having taken a beating, a wound marked his chest.

That injury was no serious matter for him. Even so, they had succeeded in stopping the giant’s assault, and the the fallen Ricardo kicked up at the giant's jaw.

Ricardo: “Ha, you were asking for it!”

Subaru: “Is that the time to say this? Hurry back, Ricardo!”

Carried by the momentum of kick’s release, Ricardo spun backward, retrieving his blade and wiping his face of blood, before retreating to join with Crusch and

Subaru, ready to confront the giant again.

Seen that the woman had been enclosed in a cage of wind and flame, Subaru's eyes involuntary widened.

Subaru: "What's that!? You, you can actually use such spectacular magic!?"

Julius: "It's merely a bluff. I'm not proficient enough to make it lethal yet."

Julius replied bitterly, the spectacle before their eyes confirming his words.

As the woman bathed in that tornado of flame, the sword in her hand flashed — and the heart of that wind was pierced by her slight movement. Unbalanced, the cage collapsed.

That woman's elegant, peerless swordplay. And the giant's own special physiology. Subaru: "... you're kidding..."

The front of his black robe fell open, and the giant's many arms were revealed. He nonchalantly picked his severed arms up from the ground and pressed them against his stumps, as blood and flesh knit with a sickening sound.

A mere moment later, the giant's formerly missing arms were reattached, with only scant traces of the injury remaining. As if confirming that healing, he took his large blades in them again, proudly waving them around.

Both looked undefeatable.

Subaru: “By contrast, it’s clear that our blitzkrieg failed.”

Looking sideways, Julius and Wilhelm, protected by Julius’s magic, were having their injuries treated by Garfiel.

The reality set in that Garfiel and Wilhelm, working together, had been soundly defeated. That sense of despair, could not easily be erased.

However, it would be a mistake to say that their situation was completely hopeless.

Subaru: “Although close combat is unreliable... long ranged attacks could still be effective.”

Whether it was the Julius’s magic, Crusch’s blade of wind, or even Subaru’s whip, they still had a chance.

The last one wouldn’t be all that helpful, even if it did work— that sentiment was there, but the other two attacks could certainly have a chance to turn the tide.

Subaru: “——”

At Subaru’s comment and expectant gaze, both Julius and Crusch nodded.

Garfiel and Wilhelm also understood the power of their opponents in close combat. From the start, Ricardo had not held any designs to face either of them

alone.

The melee fighters would temper their enemies' movement, and any gaps would be filled with magical attacks.

This was likely the best way to minimize injuries and achieve victory.

The unity of the entire party would start the pace of the battle again.

Then, at that moment,

???: "Chaotically, grudgingly, this conspiracy has arrived! What kind of garbage pieces of meat like you~ can, so foolishly, ugly, superficially dare to live? In the words of this elegant, patient lady— Kahahahaha!"

Abruptly piercing the battlefield was an inconspicuously sharp laugh.

However, upon hearing that voice, everyone understood that the appearance of the owner meant the situation had taken a turn for the worst. Subaru shuddered and shifted his gaze around, searching for that figure.

Where was she? Where was that laughter coming from?

???: "Where are you looking, you dull, dimwitted pieces of shit? It's because of this foolishness~ that you can't be saved. Come one, open your dog eyes wide, and think hard with your empty heads. Then maybe this gentle lady will show mercy to your filthy souls!"

Crusch: “——”

From next to Subaru, whose gaze swerved around, Crusch had drawn a hoarse breath.

Her amber eyes were fixed overhead. With a sinking feeling of understanding, Subaru followed her gaze expecting to see Lust at the end of it.

His the line of sight pointed to the roof of the City Hall.

Loud ridicule poured down upon them from there, as if the owner of that voice were looking down upon ants from a great distance.

In fact, that was more or less the situation. That was because,

Capella: “Gahhahahahaha! Really, that face! That stupid face! Did you save it just for me? If so, this kind lady would give you foolish apes praise! Or would you prefer saliva? You’d be very happy with my precious saliva? For you pieces of rubbish, it must be a coveted treasure, right~!”

Raucous laughter echoed through the air as Subaru glanced upward.

The giant and swordswoman didn’t have the slightest reaction as an ally joined them against their fellow opponents.

The Archbishop of Lust made a sudden appearance on the battlefield—
Capella: “Then, once more! This lovely lady is the Sin Archbishop of Lust—!”

— As the name of Lust was announced, a black dragon looked down upon them with a smile. Capella: “I am Capella Emerada Lugunica-sama! Die! You rotten slabs of meat!”

Chapter 34: Chaotic Duel

—Standing on the rooftop of the City Hall, a black dragon flaunted its wings at Subaru's group.

Opening its mouth to reveal rows of sharp teeth and a long, snaking red tongue, the black dragon narrowed its golden eyes, continue to issue a choking, sharp laugh.

That black dragon's appearance was more or less exactly how Subaru pictured the dragon species.

It had the same aura of awe that earth dragons like Patrasche, but its hair and physique weren't the same. If ground dragons averaged the size of a pterosaurs, this dragon was as large as an elephant.

With that physique, the black dragon couldn't possibly be capable of flight. Perhaps its strong wings merely served as a bluff.

Yes, flight should be impossible.

Capella: "Being ravished by your heated gazes isn't exciting at all, you meat creatures in heat! Ah~ this is awful, being seen by people like you who can only think of sexual gratification! So I won't approach you!"

Fanning its wings towards the ground, a gust of wind is cast. A red tongue flitting outward as if licking her lips, the black dragon, Capella, gave a twisted

smile. That dragon's expression was incredibly chilling.

Because of the language barrier, communication was heavily to interpretation. Patrasche was a good example.

Because Patrasche was so expressive, her stern attitude came off as quite likable.

However, this dragon evoked nothing but disgust.

Subaru: "...I haven't heard any mentions of this before, but can dragons speak?"

Julius: "Having lived for so long time, dragons are extremely intelligent and can understand human language. Lugunica's patron dragon Volcanica, who tied a covenant with the kingdom, can of course communicate with mankind through language, but his expression isn't terribly rich. I've never heard of any other dragons having that ability."

Julius, from beside Subaru, gave a detailed answer to his question.

The Knight of Knights had his blade raised at shoulder height, eyes never leaving the black dragon. Of course, Subaru and the others were in the same state.

Standing in front of them were two swordsmen of outstanding strength, and the black dragon who had named herself the Archbishop of Lust.

Their original unease had compounded into a wall of tension.

Subaru: “At the least, we have a chance of dealing with the swordsmen...”

The woman, who wielding her blade with nary a flaw in posture, and the giant, who waved his swords around, as if refamiliarizing himself with Subaru’s group.

Although the extent of the swordswoman’s strength was still unknown, the giant had chosen to directly take Ricardo's attack. Needless to say, it was not because of any clumsiness, but because he had a strategy in mind. Long range attacks, their earlier plan, would still be incredibly effective.

However, there was one pressing problem without a solution.

Subaru: “Is there anyone here who’s fought a dragon...”

Wilhelm: “—Yes.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san, seriously?”

Although Subaru had thought his question hopeless, Wilhelm had responded with affirmation.

The old swordsman turned to face the surprised Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Nearly 40 years ago, I was sent to subjugate an evil dragon named Valgren who appeared to Lugunica’s south. The incident caused much diplomatic tension because of its proximity to Vollachia.”

Subaru: “Setting the diplomatic ramifications aside, how was the experience of fighting a dragon?”

Wilhelm: “More than ten percent of our knights were sent to the battle, and, although the crusade succeeded, forty percent of those knights died. The crusade succeeded, but the result was considerable. It’s ability to fly, it’s endless stamina, were things that we should have taken into better consideration.”

Subaru: “It would seem that our situation is rather desperate...”

Seeing Subaru’s despair, Wilhelm continued,

Wilhelm: “Come to think of it...”

Wilhelm: “Compared to Valgren, this dragon is smaller in size. It should die upon beheading.”

Subaru: “And Valgren wouldn’t?”

Wilhelm: “Valgren had a total of three heads which all needed to be removed.”

Having finished speaking of that distant battle, Wilhelm tightened his grip on his sword.

So beheading would certainly kill it. That was reassuring.

Seeing Wilhelm's well-prepared stance, Subaru also took up a battle pose, whip in hand.

Seeing their refusal to yield, Capella seemed rather surprised.

Capella: "My, my, my, you're all so disgusting. You're beaten and miserable, and, aside from my reinforcements, you're facing a Sin Archbishop! You rotten creatures should hang your heads and channel the meekness of mice, and yet you're acting all normal? Was putting you with all the other insects wrong? Gahahahaha!"

Garfiel: "Stop fuckin' around! What can ya do 'gainst our numbers? My amazin' self'll go up there 'n crush ya!"

Capella: "Kahhahahaha, the barking of this rabid dog is hurting my sacred ears. Or, rather, I made a mistake. You're not a rabid hound, you're only a puny kitten! Meow~ meow~ meow~, don't be angry just because that kitty you were with died!"

Garfiel: "W-Wha, —hk!?"

Faced with those cruel jabs, Garfiel shouted, but choked on his own response. The dragon was clearly referring to Garfiel's earlier defeat, where he had

almost been beaten to death. Someone, Capella, had been watching the fight.

And, what surprised Garfiel even more,

Garfiel: “Bastard, how’d ya know my amazin’ self’s a demi-human...”

Capella: “Hah? How do I know that? Don’t think so highly of yourself, not even a single of one your hairs interests me. I could tell that you were a filthy half-breed the moment I saw you! Go die the way you lived, as a degenerate beast!”

Speaking unspeakably cruel curses, Capella turned toward the rest of their party, sniffing the air.

Capella: “What a stench! What a stench! You slabs of meat all smell rotten! Moldy, rotten, garbage meat! Preserved meats from the trash! Ah, disgusting!”

Capella, constantly giving her toxic comments, turned her gaze slightly — in Crusch’s direction.

A sticky, feverish light entered her eyes as she pouted all her attention upon Crusch, who subconsciously hugged herself tightly. When Capella spoke again, her voice was almost pleasant.

Capella: “But mixed with all that refuse is quite a slab piece of meat! So attractive, perfectly in line with tastes! This meat smells like the finest of meat! What beauty! That body! That appeal! Ah, I reallyreallyreally want to break it

with my own two hands!”

Crusch: “—That’s, enough.”

Capella: “Ahh?”

She’d become fascinated.

Her expression trancelike, the black dragon leaned toward Crusch, as if wanting to lick her from top to bottom.

At this moment, the pressure of anger interjected to interrupt each other.

Capella: “——”

Her attention still fixed on Crusch, the dragon looked up impatiently.

Julius, who had approached Crusch in her distracted state, looked rather like a conductor.

Julius: “Be burned by my sixfold light, Al Clarista!”

Julius’s six spirits each gleamed with a different color as they fired a beam of light upward.

When that iridescent light' reached Capella, it shone white, and she began to scream.

Capella: “—GAAAAAAH!!”

Julius: “This is the price of your chatter. If you had any real skill, you wouldn’t spout such nonsense.”

Obeying Julius’s command, his spirits continually fired their scorching lights.

With Cappella's piercing scream serving as background music, the two swordsmen who had been silent and still, suddenly kicked off the slate ground, flying towards Subaru’s group.

Wilhelm: “Stop there!”

Garfiel: “The hell!”

Here, Garfiel and Wilhelm both spoke up.

Wilhelm flew straight for the swordswoman, while Garfiel faced the giant’ twin blades with his own twin shields.

Woman: “——”

Wilhelm: “Don’t leave, show me your swordplay!”

As she began to retreat after meeting his first blow, Wilhelm cut her off with a sudden strike.

The old swordsman full breakthrough struck up and down with the violence of a storm. The length of her blade wasn't conducive to quick action, which served her defense poorly as Wilhelm gave rapid strike after strike.

Even so, the woman also proved fearsome. She cleverly shied away from any swing that she was unable to parry, and smoothly, with practiced ease, regained her balance.

Each time her whirling sword stabbed forth it became more apparent that the female swordsman's body was born for the sword to which she used.

Wilhelm's skill was enough for him to challenge the white whale, but, facing him, the woman's skill was enough to press Wilhelm back.

Wilhelm: "G-Gooah!"

Woman: "——"

Issuing a roar, with momentum smooth as silk, Wilhelm's rotation of cuts and swings increased in speed.

Although his body itself was old, his technique was still incredibly honed. His swordplay was the pinnacle of swordsmanship, and most young swordsmen would never match up to him.

His blade a mere flash, he flew through the air, preparing to flatten the woman into the earth.

Still silent, the woman was prepared to withstand each blow, her resolve steeled.

Without words, without righteousness, the woman was like a doll whose only purpose was battle.

Obedience had been carved into the body of this doll who only swung a blade.

The collisions of steel erupted through the air like a blast.

However, her sword must have been light, much lighter than Wilhelm's.

Each side's swordplay was clean and pure, and, aside from strikes on their respective targets, no unnecessary destruction happened.

The two flew into their solitary dance of swordplay.

Wilhelm: "Hah!"

Woman: "——"

The two waged their silent battle, their swords only being seen as flashes.

—This was the sacred realm of their duel, and intruders could not be tolerated.

Not far away, another battle was being waged.

Garfiel: “Yah! Hah! Yah!”

Giant: “——”

Roaring, muscles flexing, Garfiel deflected the giant’s blows.

Stuck with dizziness, he counterattacked, beating, roaring, visceral defeat, nausea, bones creaking.

Unlike the elegant duel taking place next to them, this battle was one marked by chaos.

Although the giant could be called a swordsman, his fighting style was different from what that would imply. It was irrational as a barbarian’s or a beast’s.

Garfiel: “Hah, kuu, ah!!”

Correspondingly, Garfiel also fought without a sense of etiquette.

Garfiel’s fighting style was wild and animalistic. Due to Subaru’s influence, he’d named it

‘Garfiel’s Flowing Battle’. This was an absurd violence that only Garfiel, who

relied on instinct, could perform; it couldn't be imitated by anyone.

In fact, Garfiel's violent blows suited the barbaric giant before him.

This obviously savage duel was one of stamina; the opponent who tired first would lose.

Therefore, success or failure was incredibly variable.

Giant: "——"

Those giant swords were so incredibly heavy that a direct blow would surely shatter Garfiel's elbow, yet he needed to use his arms to deal with them.

Garfiel needed to decisively use his shields. Holding them obliquely, his arm blocks the massive sword, but he allows it to slide along the shield, thus parrying it away.

The giant's unpredictable movements were no mere barbarism, but he used not the slightest trick, his strikes were shockingly direct and powerful.

This could not be achieved with talent alone; the giant had clearly practiced tens of millions of swings to earn his power.

Taking those swords head on, blocking them, would surely be impossible.

If there even a slight wrong move, the giant sword would cleave the silver shield in half, and Garfiel's body would resemble that broken shield.

Garfiel: "Don't... kid 'round... no more!"

Garfiel had been doing everything possible to combat the pressure of the large swords.

As they slashed from above, as they swept from the sides, as they swung up from below, Garfiel parried all of them. Then, from a gap, his arm took a punch, forcing Garfiel to retreat.

The trouble was, in addition to two powerful hands waving large swords, the giant had another six arms.

Garfiel's defense could be punctured with a third attack, and the giant had started using not two, but three arms to wield swords.

Garfiel had the advantage in speed, but that giant's strength was far superior.

As his chin was struck, as he parried those massive swords, his knees were kicked, sending his face plummeting toward the ground. Four more blows followed this, but Garfiel caught himself as he fell, and finally managed to block an attack, planting his feet firmly on the ground.

Blood, broken bones, and bitter cries, those were what this savage battlefield was filled with.

Watching the two passionate warriors, Subaru unable to interfere with that chaos.

Subaru: “——”

On one side Wilhelm’s quiet duel, and on the other was Garfiel’s chaotic war.

Subaru and Crusch held their breaths, unable to join the battlefield on either sides. This was not due to any inability; rather, they were too shocked by the fighting spirit from both sides to react.

However, unlike Subaru, who was submerged in awe,

Ricardo: “This is bad, we have to act soon.”

Ricardo, who had been surveying Julius's magic, took a step forward. Seeing Ricardo’s movement, Subaru issued a ‘right’ and also began to move, but,

Crusch: “Subaru-sama!”

Ricardo: “Get down!”

Feeling a sudden yank on his collar, Subaru found himself being dragged to the ground by Crusch. Ricardo stood in front of the two, shielding them, releasing a ferocious roar.

Ricardo: “WAAA, HAAAA—!!”

The fierce sound waves shook the atmosphere, creating an invisible force of destruction.

This roaring wave was the same as the one Mimi and her brothers had used against the White Whale. This was an incredibly powerful skill that had noticeably injured it, and Ricardo had just now unleashed it completely on his own.

Beaten back by the roar was a glowing black flame.

That dark flame had scattered in the face of that wave. The nature of the fire was even more frightening than its burning. Anything it touched crumbled to ash, which poured all over the square as it fell.

However, the real horror in those scattered residual flames was, in fact,

Subaru: “That fire... isn’t going out...?”

Black ash fell to the slate ground, still burning, without any sustenance. The flames continued to burn and they swelled and stretched and spread.

Any fire that had fallen on the surface of the water also continued to burn,

Like dripping oil into the water, the fire leapt higher, as if showing its superiority.

Ricardo: “Bro, how long are you planning to stay that way? Speaking of which, doesn’t this situation usually happen in reverse?”

Julius: “Subaru, no matter how you look at it, being protected by a woman is...”

Ricardo and Julius both offered discouraging words to Subaru, who was still recovering from the terror of scattered fire. From their point of view, Subaru lay on the ground, under Crusch, who was deflecting any damage from him.

Subaru: “Wah!”

Crusch: “It’s great that you’re unhurt. Please rest assured, I’ll refrain from saying anything about this to Ferris and Emilia.”

Subaru: “I feel even more ashamed for feeling relieved!”

Crusch pulled him to his feet, adding another point to Subaru’s shame score.

Patting himself off, Subaru looked up to the source of the black flame— of course, that was the black dragon, who sat wearing a frown.

He could sense nothing from her but a sense of disgust.

Capella: “Disgusting, disgusting, don’t look at me with such an excited gaze! Stop looking, don’t violate me with your dirty eyes! Kahahahaha! It’s like they say, you’re forbidden from stroking any dancers who perform for you, so stop

ravishing this charming lady! Gahahaha!”

Subaru: “How...”

Despite being directly attacked by Julius’s magic, Capella acted as if nothing had happened.

However, that wasn’t to say that she hadn’t suffered any harm. In fact, she’d suffered considerable damage from his attack.

The dragon’s right wing had been burned until it was no more than a festering bloodied piece of flesh. Perhaps she’d wanted to use the wing to protect her body, but injury had been the price for her body’s safety.

The magic had burned through the dragon’s wing, reaching her body. Her abdomen had been scorched and melted, and her innards seemed to have been boiled. The right side of the dragon's face had been blown off, and her wagging tongue which enjoyed ridiculing others had been severed. Her eyes dangled freely, no longer resting in their sockets.

Half-dead wouldn’t cut it; this was nothing but a corpse.

Subaru audibly swallowed, Julius and Ricardo frowned, and Crusch couldn’t help but give a little girl’s gasp. But this wasn’t due to the dragon’s horrific state.

— Instead, it was due to that battered flesh regenerating.

Melted bones regrew, destroyed muscles lengthened, severed tissues sutured; Capella's destroyed body regenerated at an alarming rate.

The impossible heat given off by her regeneration evaporated any remaining traces blood.

Capella: "Now, having seen even my beautiful internal organs, are you satisfied? Are you a group of rotten garbage creatures who get turned on watching my metamorphosis? Gahahaha! Satisfied? Hey, were you so satisfied you started leaking?"

Subaru: "How... what happened?"

Capella: "Shouldn't you be able to tell on sight? Did you actually have to ask? How foolish are you? But this compassionate lady shall answer you. As you can see, I'm obviously immortal!"

Immortal— this was the simplest, most absolute description of her power.

Subaru couldn't help but gulp at Capella's description of her own power. The thought that she was bluffing crossed his mind. Indeed, it would be comforting to think that she was bluffing.

Subaru: "It's nothing but a quick regeneration ability..."

Capella: "Call it what you want. I'm not strong enough to call it invincible, so immortal it is."

Subaru: “——”

Capella: “My my my, you’re unable to even talk anymore! You disgusting rotten eggs! You putrid filthy meat! Go die! Everyone except me should go die —wait! Wait! Wait!”

Capella interrupted her own foul words. She unfurled her healed wings and fluttered them, slowly bringing her bulky form toward the roof of the City Hall.

Thinking that she was preparing to swoop upon them, Subaru braced himself for her attack. However,

Capella: “Time’s up, I have to go make the next broadcast, so I’ll go back inside. Talking to you is just a waste of time, and I’m in a hurry! You all just stay here and die, along with that rather lovely piece of meat! Go rot in hell!”

Subaru: “H-Huh?”

Suddenly losing interest, Capella yawned and strode leisurely into the hall, where Subaru lost sight of her.

He couldn’t help but consider whether or not that was meant to lure her enemies deeper in— Julius: “She might be trying to lure us in, don’t you think... but we can’t let her make that broadcast.”

Subaru: “If we let her go, the city’s going to fall into a panic. Everyone will find out what we’re doing. We have to catch up with her!”

Some unknown hunch led him on.

Furthermore, with that size, how did Capella enter the inside of the City Hall? Although he didn't know how large the broadcast room was, it seemed that Capella would destroy the room with a single large movement. But he didn't have the time to consider this right now.

Ricardo: "Alright, I'll stay with those two to deal with the guys on the outside. Bro, you'll go inside with Jul-chan and Crusch-san."

Ricardo gave instructions to Subaru, who gave a questioning look at his decisive words.

Ricardo: "These swordsmen are a bit too much for you and Crusch-san, and I'm not suited for indoor action. Jul-chan can handle that pretty good. Don't ya think."

Julius: "A very apt judgment. To be honest, I'd be worried leaving only Wilhelm and Garfiel here, so I'll leave it up to you, Ricardo."

Ricardo: "Of course, I won't disappoint!"

Julius and Ricardo nodded to each other, leaving no room for doubt.

Being from the same faction, perhaps they could communicate their intent with only a glance. Subaru was unable to protest, so, scratching his head,

Subaru: “Garfiel! You’re absolutely not allowed to lose! After you send that guy flying and we defeat Lust, we’re going to go save Emilia, you hear me!?”

Garfiel: “Captain, I ain’t got time t’deal with ya right now!”

Subaru spoke to Garfiel, who was still engaged in his chaotic war. Next to him, Crusch lifted a hand towards her mouth, aiming her voice in Wilhelm’s direction.

Crusch: “Wilhelm, I’ll leave it to you!”

Wilhelm: “No need to worry!”

Wilhelm gave a brief response to his master’s brief words.

A true master and vassal only needed those brief words. Then, led by Julius, Subaru and Crusch made their move.

Leaving the central square, the three ran toward the interior of the City Hall. The two figures guarding the tower responded to this, forgoing their current opponents for Subaru’s group.

Ricardo: “Standing in a line like this makes things easier for me, haa—!”

His ferocious laugh created destructive sound waves which swept up small

scattered stones, and the giant and woman faltered slightly. Although the power of the roaring waves had begun to diminish, they were still effective in halting the two. Behind them, their opponents caught up, contempt in their eyes.

Wilhelm: "How discourteous, ignoring me when I have eyes for only you!"
Garfiel: "Don't turn yer ass t' yer opponent unless ya want it gone!" "——"

Slashing and slicing, striking and stabbing, the chaotic duels in the square continued, fierce battles which allowed for no outside intervention.

Unable to hear the sounds of the battle any longer, Subaru rushed toward the entrance of the City Hall.

Subaru: "Where would the room be?"

Crusch: "I don't know for certain, but I think it would be at the uppermost level, for the sound to reach as far as possible."

Julius: "There may be ambushes along the way, be careful."

Passing the main entrance, they arrived inside the City Hall.

A place that should have been crowded, with a lovely lady providing a reception service and bright lights coloring the scene, was now dimly lit, in a state of apparent turmoil.

Fortunately, there were no other cultists occupying this level, nor were there

corpses strewn across the room, so—

Subaru: “Come on, let's go. There should be some kind of floor map telling us where the room is!”

Julius: “If we can, I’d also like to confirm the safety of the staff here, although that’s looking a bit hopeless...”

Subaru: “What’s...”

He checked the help desk and confirmed that no one was hiding there, then pointed to the stairs.

Julius ascended the steps quietly, peering deep into the corridor, and gently shook his head.

Crusch followed him with a frown, and, upon tracing his gaze, her expression trembled.

Seeing her reaction, Subaru joined the two— and seeing what they had, held his breath.

With dragging, pitter-pattering steps, a figure appeared.

Peeking around the stairs, a child wearing a devilish smile emerged.

At first glance, he was only a kid.

A petite physique, a childlike face, evoking an image of youthfulness.

However, this notion existed in appearance only.

His dark brown hair hung loose, and his body was wrapped with a single cloth, giving him a rather grim appearance.

With a devilish smile on his little face, his eyes looked as if they contained all the poisons in the world, with decaying glows and toxic liquids — they were, of course, not the eyes of human beings.

And, in the present circumstances, it was evident what was wrong with him.

Kid: “So happy, very happy, so very happy, so very very happy, because of this happiness, such happiness, incredibly happiness, such incredible happiness, such incredibly incredible happiness, deserves! A feast! Feast! It’s been a really suffering wait, with this empty stomach! So the first bite must be delicious to make up for it!”

Pleased, happy from the bottom of his heart, the barefoot boy marched as if dancing to a beat.

As he spoke, he revealed his teeth, which were the length of a canine’s. Seeing that image, that attitude, that exaggerated speech, Subaru’s mind began to boil.

If that wasn't just his imagination, if this boiling rage did indeed exist, then this kid was—

Subaru: "If you're some naughty kid who slipped in here playing hide-and-seek, explain yourself quickly. If that's really the case, we'll let you go. But, if not, hurry up and name yourself."

Speaking in a low voice, Subaru deliberately forced himself to remain calm.

And, as if deliberately provoking Subaru, the kid twisted his juvenile face in a mocking laugh.

Kid: "Are you really confronting us with that attitude? Is that attitude meant for us or someone else? Check it for yourself."

Subaru: "That's enough. I can see that you're my enemy!"

Roy: "We are the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishops of Gluttony, Roy Alphard."

Subaru: "GLUTTONY— !!"

As soon as the child claimed to be Gluttony, Subaru struck with his whip.

Slashing through the air, his whip mercilessly cut toward his enemy's face. However, Roy: "Well, it's hardly uncommon to encounter those who want a bite of us."

His teeth biting the end whip, Gluttony spoke brazenly.

Chapter 35: Ambushes and Surprises

Subaru's first merciless strike had been blocked by teeth.

Subaru: “——”

Biting the front end of the whip, dancing as if deliberately intending to infuriate, was Gluttony, Roy Alphard.

Alphard. Subaru was a little surprised at the name.

Subaru: “This bastard also shares the name of a star—hk!”

Crusch: “Subaru-sama, that topic is over! Allow me to engage him!”

As Subaru raised his arm for another brutal blow, Alphard drew his own weapon. At the same time, Crusch unleashed her Hundred Man Strike.

A frenzied blade of wind instantly swept through the first floor of the City Hall, bisecting chairs and the reception desk.

Of course, the cut should also have mercilessly cut Alphard, but—

Roy: “Wow, awesome! But although this one looks tough...”

Crusch: “—Eh!?”

The boy, as if seeing the invisible blade of wind, bent over backward to avoid it. Like a bridge, his head rested on the floor briefly, before he flipped backward.

That action had transformed him into a battle-ready pose.

Roy: “As an attack, that was a rather third-rate tactic. It doesn’t seem all that delicious!c

Finished, Alphard leapt up from the ground, his body flying forward like a bullet.

His mouth opened to expose rows of sharp teeth resembling a hounds. Coupled with his appearance, people would mistakenly think he was a straggly wild dog. Only, a wild dog’s danger level could never compare.

Crusch brought her sword up to meet him, attempting to behead him, but...

Roy: “Although your qualifications are good, they’re not enough! To us, you’re not even a beginner!”

Crusch: “—Ah!”

As he waved his right hand, Crusch’s sword bounced away with a sharp sound. At a closer look, swaddled in the cloth wrapped around Alphard’s wrists,

were twin daggers.

He held a dagger in each hand, a weapon allowing his thin, small body to fight with speed and flexibility.

While parrying her sword, his left hand swept toward Crusch's throat. Although she immediately shifted to avoid it, Alphard flipped through the air, around her shoulder, and kicked her aside.

Crusch: "Wha—!"

Subaru: "Crusch-san!"

Roy: "Don't just stand there and watch when you're the easiest target!"

Alphard stomped on the ground, flying at Subaru. In the dim lighting, the thin figure of Gluttony, wrapped in rags, disappeared in the darkness, Subaru lost sight of his figure—

Subaru: "Not good..."

Alphard: "In your Sloth, you couldn't keep up."

Subaru: "Wha!?"

Aiming at the flaw-filled Subaru, Alphard revealed another one of his flaws.

Once, feeling powerless, Subaru had sworn to himself that no matter the situation, he wouldn't act impulsively and hastily.

Biting his lip, he grounded himself with the pain, allowing their most powerful party member an opportunity to strike.

And Julius's quiet command cut through the air.

Alphard immediately managed to twist evasively, but his body was still cut down by the Knight of Knights.

Gluttony rolled onto the floor, entire body covered with blood.

Roy: "Ughya! Woah, surprising—"

Julius: "Then, how about another surprise. Watch as my buds bloom!"

As Julius spoke, his spirits began another set of attacks as Alphard bounced back to his feet and darted away.

At that moment, iridescence filled dim hall. An aurora blossomed forth from Julius's back, diving toward Gluttony.

Roy: "Spirits!"

Julius: "I hope one such as you, who appreciates gourmet, will enjoy. No

matter which bud, I am proud to enjoy the bloom of these child flowers.”

Roy: “Awful, they’re pretentious, we don’t like them!”

Seeing the world burning in the aurora, Alphard spoke as he escaped high. Julius's thin sword followed his back, pressing him one, and he attempted to escape with a sharp jerk.

Julius: “—Lolimancer!”

Subaru: “Don’t call me by that name! Juli!”

Julius: “Take Valkyrie with you to the top floor! Stop the broadcast!”

While choosing one another’s pseudonyms, Julius declared that he would hold off Alphard.

While supporting a wheezing Crusch, Subaru judged this as the most reasonable course of action, but he couldn’t quite agree with it.

The mocking boy who was darting around was, after all, Gluttony.

This was the enemy who Subaru had pursued for more than a year. Saying that defeating him was one of Subaru’s top priorities would be no exaggeration.

Even though he was right there—

Crusch: “I-I understand. Juli-sama, I will pray for your blade to be swift and true.”

Crusch: “—hk”

However, before Subaru could protest, Crusch climbed to her feet and gave a response to Julius, her face full of unwillingness.

Crusch was another victim of Gluttony, having been robbed of her memory.

Of course, she had also wanted to seize this chance for the search of her memory. Even so, she assumed her own responsibility and entrusted the fight Gluttony to others.

Even aside those feelings, she was also well aware of her own lack of strength. Considering Subaru and Crusch’s abilities, this was the only way.

Roy: “So what's going to happen? How are we doing it? Are we all going together? Even the disappointing woman and scummy man can be served as appetizer. Then, Juli-sama, we’ll eat him, swallow him, nibble him, lick him, taste him, swallowed him, bite him, bite him into pieces, into pieces, and devour! Not bad!”

Julius: “Don’t say anything unnecessary. I didn’t become Juli in vain!”

While the auroras in the narrow space are gradually disappearing, Alfred is still a comfortable smile. Julius pursued the victory, the sword struck each other

issued a steel sound.

At this moment, Julius and Subaru instantly glanced.

That line of sight is relative to Subaru, as if it means there is no need to go further—

Subaru: “Ah, dammit! Listen! Bastard, you absolutely can’t lose!”

Julius: “That’s my line. It doesn’t matter, I won’t, no, I absolutely can’t die here.”

Crusch: “Let’s go, Lolimancer-sama!”

Scratching his head, for time being, Subaru set aside his feelings and made movements to comply.

Although he should at least walk in front of Crusch, in truth, although it was shameful, she could react to any surprise attack much faster than he could.

Subaru chased behind the still wounded Crusch, and they both sprinted up the next flight of stairs. Before leaving, he took one last look and Julius and Alphard.

Julius seemed to have the advantage, but he couldn’t let his guard down.

Julius: “Go!”

Subaru: “—Bastard!”

Aware of Subaru’s gaze, Julius made him restless to the very end.

Although he was incredibly annoying, the idea of something happening to him was troublesome.

Subaru turned to follow Crusch, bounding up the stairs in one breath.

Knowing that an ambush may have been awaiting them, they immediately took another flight of stairs, heading toward the topmost room.

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There were several important elements of an ambush.

First of all was the location. Ambushes were a tactic that had been put in place by an opponent waiting for opportunity to attack an enemy from a dominant location. That was the most essential element.

Secondly, the enemy needed to indeed appear at the set location. Finally setting the ambush but finding the key opponent missing would render it completely pointless.

Moreover, it was also necessary to speculate on the time when the enemy would arrive at the place of ambush. If there were a lack of concentration of ambushes en route, their effects could not be maximized.

So, assuming that Lust was setting an ambush, all three of these conditions had been fulfilled.

In any event, they needed to Break Into the Broadcast Room Within a Set Amount of Time.

From their enemy's perspective, there was no prey that would be more enjoyable to hunt.

Subaru: "Therefore, we must first destroy this situation."

Crusch: "I understand this point... No, I've decide to believe in Subaru. I will say no more."

Having arrived at the topmost room, they found a staircase.

That is, a staircase to the rooftop, where the Subaru and Crusch would have to be prepared to defeat Capella's strategy.

Crusch, who was initially puzzled by Subaru proposal, seemed determined. This way of doing things was her invariable merit, both before and after losing her memory.

Crusch: "I honestly just want to see how the battle in the square is faring..."

Subaru: "But if we go check on them, then our actions will be meaningless."

Even at this height they could hear the clashing of sword and Garfiel's cursing. That fight was still ongoing, so no aid from that front could be expected.

Subaru: "Speaking of which..."

Looking around, Subaru examined the situation of the roof.

Claw marks had been left everywhere on the ground, traces of the black dragon walking around. The railings and fences that looked over the square were collapsed by the magic that Julius released.

Subaru thought of that terrible power, as he examined the room, confirming that they really were below the broadcast room.

Of course, Capella would be waiting there in ambush.

Crusch: "... ah."

Subaru: "What happened? Please take a moment if you're unprepared."

Crusch: "I'm sorry, but just now, I noticed something."

Subaru: "...?"

Crusch spoke rather weakly as Subaru busied himself with an iron fence. Subaru looked at her with surprise, and she looked back at him with a stiff expression.

Crusch: "I seem to have a certain fear of heights."

Subaru: "An unexpected weakness... got it. Ready!"

Confirming that it has been fixed firmly, Subaru nodded toward Crusch, who returned a stiff one, and stepped meekly into Subaru's arms.

Crusch: "—Please don't let go."

Subaru: "Crusch-san, there are many men who will misunderstand, so it's better if you don't say those kinds of words often."

Crusch: "——?"

Crusch turned her head with a wry smile. Then, with Crusch nestled in his arms, clinging to him, he swung loose from the building.

Of course, their bodies were drawn downward by gravity. As they fell, they reached the lowest point the whip wrapped around Subaru's wrist would allow them to.

Subaru: “—hk!”

At the same time, supporting the weight of the both of them, Subaru’s shoulders were in enough pain to be in danger of breaking.

Twisting sideways, the two swung in an upward arc, reaching another outer wall of the City Hall. Seeing a window approaching, Subaru stretched out his feet and broke through it.

Crusch: “Gah—hk!”

Subaru: “Wha!?”

As the glass shattered, Subaru and Crusch rolled into the broadcast room. For a moment, Crusch seem to let loose a small cry, but Subaru pretended not to hear it as he released her from his arms.

Both climbed to their feet, immediately looked around, and found that...
Dragon: “——hk”

Staring blankly at the two who had just jumped in, with eyes wide open, was a black dragon sitting in a stiff posture.

The same massive body that they had seen on the roof was stuffed into the room. The black dragon had folded her wings, facing the door that one would normally enter from.

Presumably, she had originally intended to turn Subaru to ash the moment he

tried to enter, but that strategy had been completely defeated.

Obstructed by her huge body, she was in a room that confined her movement greatly.

Although the black dragon attempted to prepare herself to attack, moving her wings...

Subaru: "Crusch-san!"

Crusch: "Right!"

As if ridding herself of her fear of heights, Crusch nodded a response, before loosing her cut.

Her blade of wind sliced into the black dragon, damaging a wing and severing a frontal leg. The black dragon screamed loudly as dark blood began to spray.

Dragon: "AAAAHHHHHHHH!!"

Subaru: "Watch out! Get down... oah!?"

Capella writhed in pain, her dragon wings sending the room into disarray as she flapped her wings wildly.

Although this room was rather larger than usual, its durability was not so strong that it could withstand the riots of an elephant-sized creature. In order

to escape from this destruction, Subaru turned to run, but at that moment he found,

—At the foot of the black dragon, a chained young girl trembled.

Girl: “—!”

Subaru met eyes with that tearful girl.

Realizing that Lust had adopted a very effective hostage strategy, should the initial ambush fail, Subaru was filled with rage.

Focusing, Subaru instinctively chose to move forward rather than escape.

Thinking of a way to dodge the tail hanging over his head, he slid toward the little girl. Picking up the trembling petite body, he flicked his whip fiercely at the black dragon's back. It didn't seem to inflict too much damage, but it allowed Subaru to express his rage.

But Crusch's strikes were not so powerless.

Dragon: “Wait! Wait! I'm not... hk!”

Crusch: “No need to answer! This is retribution for the disaster you've wrought upon the city!”

Crusch's relentless blade moved as if it had a mind of its own.

With an almost disappointing fragility, Capella bore no defense to that force.

Crusch cut the remaining wing, and Capella gave a keening wail. Although this likely didn't have much to do with Subaru, that huge body was shaken violently by a plethora of attacks, and she stumbled backwards to the opposite direction of the window Subaru had broken.

The black dragon's wings didn't regenerate this time.

Although she'd called her body immortal, if this was her speed of regeneration, then it could not be called a threat.

Crusch: "—It's over!"

Dragon: "Wai—"

Not allowing her to finish, Crusch loosed several successive attacks on the black dragon's body, head, and wings. Her huge body hit the wall hard, smashing through the window frame and falling outside.

The falling black dragon would like to expand the wings, but one side of the dragon wing is chopped from the roots, the other side of the dragon wing is like being hooked fragmented, it is unable to support the state of flight.

Dragon: "——hk"

The black dragon, without a chance to regenerate, had no time to say anything, simply falling to the ground.

A few seconds later, Lust hit the ground with the sound of meat hitting a wall or a wet towel falling to the floor.

Crusch: "I'll go confirm the situation. Subaru-sama, can you take care of this child?"

Subaru: "R-Right, I got it."

Watching the black debris falling from edge of the window, was the ever vigilant Crusch. With heartfelt trust in her, he also set down the girl he'd just recovered.

The girl was still in a state of fear, confusion in her quivering gaze as she looked at Subaru.

This was inevitable. After that long, anyone would be afraid.

Subaru: "It's okay, the dragon just now has been killed by the superheroine big sister over there, though not easily... where's everyone else?"

Girl: "Ah, eh..."

Subaru: "Although it is hard to believe, we're one of our own, and came here in order to save you. We have to finish shortly, before the bad guy comes back.

Can you help me?"

He bent his knees, keeping their lines of sight the same, and spoke with a steady tone.

This was the unconscious behavior he would use whenever speaking to someone younger. She seemed to calm down slightly, taking deep breaths as if steeling herself before replying.

Girl: "There's a room over there... everyone's, in there."

Subaru: "Is it locked? That room..."

The girl pointed to a little room inside the broadcast room.

Actually, this room wasn't the broadcast room, right? Although the room was large, there was no broadcast equipment at all. Even if the radio was a magic device, Subaru could find anything that it could possibly be in this room. Then, the room that the girl was pointing to was most likely the real broadcast room.

As he turned his gaze over, Subaru hesitated. He wanted to inquire about the life or death of the people inside.

However, asking the girl such a thing was far too cruel and inconsiderate.

Subaru touched the still shaking girl's head, slowly making his way toward the room.

Girl: “——”

Heart trembling, Subaru felt sweat break out on his neck.

Even the chaotic battle seconds earlier hadn't made him so nervous, but suddenly, his throat felt parched and dry. This was the sense of a nasty premonition, a terror which preoccupied his mind.

Crusch: “Subaru-sama?”

Subaru: “Everything's fine. I'm about to start looking around. What happened to Lust?”

Crusch: “...Everything's fine here too... I don't know why, but she's staying where she is.

Crusch replied with that warning about Lust. After hearing that answer, Subaru took a deep breath and headed for the room, reaching out to brush the doorknob.

In the radio room, there was a possibility of other cultists hiding. That would be something Subaru needed to take into consideration.

But, for some reason, that kind of worry seemed superfluous. In fact, this idea is right.

Because, in actuality, no cultists occupied that room. Occupying it, was—

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With speechless gazes, they looked at Subaru with amazement.

No, maybe he just wanted to assume they were looking. Subaru had no way of understanding how they observed the world, and he didn't particularly want to know.

He simply felt dismay. His voice wouldn't work. This situation could only be described as speechless. His thoughts froze, and he thought of nothing. However, there was something he finally did understand.

— The source of that irritating sound accompanying the broadcast he'd heard in the shelter. Subaru: “—What, is this?”

In response to Subaru, That Voice spoke.

That Voice was one which welcomed Subaru, a fearsome sound, a defiant sound, a joyful sound, a meaningless sound—

The sound of numerous beating wings echoed throughout the room.

In the darkened room, countless blinking red compound eyes moved, as if watching Subaru.

The broadcast had sounded as if many many flies had been crammed into one room.

And all the flies were the same size as people, this one, that one too, all of them.

“—AAAHH!!”

Subaru: “—Eh!?”

In a sea of blankness, Subaru registered a sudden pained cry.

Shocked into a sudden response, Subaru slammed the door, closing along with it the sound of a hundred beating wings. Looking back, he found...

???: “Gahahahaha! Stupid, stupid! You dregs, the meat in your heads simply isn’t enough. You actually tried to match me in a battle of the wits? Who put the sugar into your brain and melted your cerebrum~! Kahahahaha!”

Crusch was crushed under the heel of the girl who issued that sharp raucous laughter.

There was no doubt that this was that familiar poisonous laughter,

Capella: “It’s me, Capella-chan! Gaahahahaha!”

As Capella winked and stuck out her tongue, Crusch vomited blood, the whites of her eyes barely showing.

Chapter 36: The Beginning and Conclusion of Love

Behind him was a room full of gigantic flies.

Subaru and Crusch had defeated the black dragon, and it now lay motionless on the ground outside.

And yet, in front of Subaru was a laughing girl who repeatedly dug her foot into Crusch.

Sinister laughter, a sardonic tone. The person in front of him was undoubtedly Lust, Capella Emerada Lugunica.

— His entire body began to tingle. Subaru: “What, what is this...?”

Capella: “Do you actually have to take time to think about it? You scum shouldn’t worry about such things— the best choice for you is to recognize the reality before you! You saw a beautiful maiden of shaking with fear! But her true identity is an archbishop of the Witch Cult~!”

As Subaru’s mind raced, Capella danced around, sticking her mocking tongue out at Subaru.

Crusch’s eyes rolled back as she was relentlessly attacked.

Capella: “Didn’t you find it strange at all? Here, at the City Hall, why would

there be a child meat? But your first reaction was doubtlessly ‘Ah, this kid is in danger, I have to save her...’ What a disappointingly stupid train of thought!”

Subaru: “S-Shut up, already. There’s plenty I’d like to say but first, move your damn foot.”

Capella: “Hmm? Are you so captivated by my beautiful legs that you’re dripping already~? Or are you thinking of this sow that’s licking my feet? Indeed, she has a lovely body~. Are you trying so hard that you can’t restrain yourself right now? Gahahahaha!”

Subaru: “——! This bitch! Bastard, we’re not just creatures for you to tread on!”

Capella wore a ecstatic expression and her heel ravaged Crusch again and again. In response to her atrocious actions and ridicule, Subaru’s veins boiled with rage.

His lower body tensed, ready to move forward. Capella, who had provoked Subaru, seemed to welcome an attack. However, Subaru was not so foolish as to blindly rush forward.

Even without her memory, Crusch was a fearsome warrior.

Her strength had been vouched for by Wilhelm. And yet, in the few seconds that she’d vanished from Subaru’s sight, she’d lost without any resistance.

Lust's strength was undoubtedly far above Subaru's.

Subaru needed to solve the situation without engaging her in combat.

Subaru: "——"

Crusch, whose very life was in danger, needed to be immediately recovered and taken to Julius and the others.

It was up to him to engineer an escape, abandoning their mission in the process. Although they had failed to stop the broadcast, that mission wasn't worth their lives.

And they also hadn't found the people who they should be rescuing, at least not on this floor.

His only conclusion was that their reserve of combat power wasn't enough to retake the city in secrecy.

Therefore, Subaru could not hesitate.

Capella: "Huh?"

Subaru: "Haa!"

Capella exhaled, slightly surprised by Subaru's sudden action.

The target of Subaru's whip was not Capella, but a shelf on the side wall. He found a metal bust, large enough to be embraced by two arms, and wrapped in it his whip, deftly flicking his wrist and bringing it toward Capella.

Subaru now wielded a high-speed metal whirlwind.

His weapon now had the power to open a seam in the wall. Whether to block or evade, she would need to remove her foot from Crusch.

Subaru would take advantage of that moment to retrieve her.

Subaru: "Take that!"

Capella: "I will~."

Subaru: "Huh?"

In contrast to the Subaru's frenzied cries, Capella responded with casual words.

The sound of a hard object encountering bones and flesh was accompanied by blood spurting forth from Capella's forehead, which had been torn almost completely apart. The inside of her scalp was visible, and blood strained her torn cheeks.

Subaru could no longer bear to look at what had originally been such a cute face.

Her left eye had been half-destroyed, and its light had vanished. This unexpected situation left Subaru's mind momentarily blank.

His action had been intended to create a distraction for his enemy, but he'd been caught off guard instead— and an archbishop certainly wouldn't let that moment go.

Capella: "Aren't you cute to think that I'd play right into the palms of your hands? Isn't this kind of helpless stupidity~ a problem for you? Gahahahaha!"

Capella's mocking slipped into Subaru frozen thoughts.

The girl turned to face the stiff Subaru, and, in the next moment, a gust of a black whirlwind hit him, abruptly sending him flying.

Subaru: "Gah!"

Smacked by a gigantic force, his right half took a heavy blow, and Subaru was knocked into a table, before rolling to the ground. His entire body was shook, he he dizzily climbed to his feet, bracing himself against the wall. What he saw next was,

Capella: "What's wrong? Are you so stunned by my beauty that you can't even move?"

Subaru: "...what, just happened?"

Capella: “You actually have to ask? Just~ use your eyes for once~!”

Capella happily swayed her body, and Subaru couldn't even articulate a cry of anguish.

He saw that what had just attacked him was a dragon's tail, sprouting from behind the petite girl.

That disconcerting appearance imprinted itself upon Subaru's consciousness.

Subaru: “Could you be... a dragon?”

Capella: “Right~ your hopeless brain, which couldn't realize the truth even upon impact! Even after this gentle lady has specifically given you so many hints, you can't imagine it, you helpless scummy meat.”

Subaru: “——!”

Capella waved her tail lightly as Subaru took in her physiology. Her long tail gave a fierce sweep, and the ground cracked as Subaru barely threw himself aside in time. But...

Capella: “Isn't your relief naive?”

Subaru: “Wah!?”

However, as he prepared to pull himself to his feet, Subaru hit by her huge left wrist. As he bounced away, he took another hit from the dragon tail awaiting him, and after a violent impact with the ceiling, was slashed by feathered wing, before finally coming to a rest on the ground.

Coughing violently as the impact sent him rolling across the floor, he witnessed the true face of the terror that had attacked him.

Where before there had only been a black tail, now there was a fist covered in animal hair. Then came that black tail from before, and finally, a pair of bird's wings, long enough for the sharp feathers to slash across Subaru's body. —And these all belonged to that young girl's form.

Capella: "You should have just about~ figured the answer out, right?"

Alien, was the only word that came to mind.

A dragon's tail, a beast's arm, the wings of a great bird, all on a human girl.

He couldn't think of any other suitable words to describe her. A wordless description of this creature that shouldn't exist could be given as a sense of physical aversion.

He could feel nothing but a sense of disgust toward the monster in front of him.

Subaru: "Variation, transformation..."

Capella: “I am the Sin Archbishop of Lust, Capella Emerada Lugúnica. All the love and respect in this world exists to be monopolized by myself alone. If someone loves me, no matter how abnormal their desire is, I’ll respond. In short, I am the ultimate embodiment of all kinds of virtue and beauty in the world. Any girl matching your preferences, I can become. Hey~ I’m a dutiful woman, aren’t I? Kahahahaha!”

While wantonly speaking nonsense, Capella turned to face Subaru and began to freely change her form.

She shifted from her abnormal shape back to the tiny girl, but her hands and feet and then immediately extended to become the adult body of a grown woman. Just as Subaru realized this, she changed into a simple village girl, but, in the next moment has become a maiden with a lewd smile.

Capella: “Now, how do you like me?”

Subaru: “——”

Speechless. He was unable to say anything. One glance, and he realized that this was the worst possible situation.

She was a desecration of human values. In this sense, her ability was obvious. The power of Lust was to desecrate and trample on various values so that she would be the only loved thing in the world.

And with just a look, he saw that the wound marring her face had been long healed, without a traces of the injury left behind. Her terrible ability to

regenerate— or, in reality, her ability to transform, had long cured her old injuries.

In any case, he'd finally solved the mystery of how the dragon had become a girl. He'd originally thought she was like Petelgeuse, able to use the bodies of others, but, if that weren't the case...

Subaru: “——what?”

If that weren't the case, then what had happened with the dragon from earlier, and the flies in the broadcast room?

Capella: “Have you finally realized it?”

Subaru: “Wait... wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a second.”

As if she'd read his innermost thoughts, Capella's expression had changed, and she laughed mockingly.

She'd become a long haired lady, and even the sound of her laughter changed as well.

In this situation, where he was uncertain of even who he was speaking to, Subaru shook his head.

This can't be, it's impossible, it could never be true.

However, were he right, everything up until now could be explained.

Capella's Lust allowed her to change and transform her body.

And if this ability of hers were effective on objects other than her physical body...

Capella: "Has your waterlogged brain finally realized the identify of those disgusting flies~?"

Subaru: "They... they're..."

Capella: "Hmm~ hmm~ hurry and give your answer, and I'll hear you out. Gahahahahaha!"

Capella covered her mouth with her hand and laughed loudly.

Hating that attitude from the bottom of his heart, Subaru said in a trembling voice,

Subaru: "—They're... the people in this building, who you've transformed."

Capella: "Correct~, but you were pretty slow, so no prizes~. I won't give you any appreciation. Ah, pointless scum, why do you exist? Anyway, I am totally unreadable ~"

Subaru: “Those are my lines!”

Capella didn't look in the least guilty about this brutal atrocity.

Needless to say, she'd just stuffed those people into a dark room. When their red eyes had fixed themselves on Subaru, their wings, which weren't capable of flight, had been flapping desperately, issued a loud buzzing flutter.

—They must have been asking for his help then.

Subaru: “There's something wrong with your head! Why... how could you do such a thing! Why would you do it? Turning people into flies... why!?”

Capella: “It's horrifying, right?”

Subaru: “It's beyond twisted! You... you, you...”

Capella: “Maybe it's just because I can't help but create disgusting creatures~?”

Again, Subaru couldn't find words to respond.

With harsh breaths and clench teeth, Subaru fixated on her with a fiery, intense gaze of hatred, as if trying to kill her with his sight.

She could play with the lives of others, even turning them into flies. Those atrocities were even worse than murder.

In these few hours, Subaru had successively encountered four archbishops who he'd never met before.

Wrathful Sirius was a madwoman who manipulated the emotions of others and craved a selfish love.

Greedy Regulus self-righteously and forcefully imposed his own values upon others.

Gluttonous Alphard stole memories and existences, a poison to humanity who could escape punishment.

And Lustful Capella was a monster who stripped away human dignity and identity.

They were all hopeless, guilty of madness.

Capella: “——”

In contrast to the enraged Subaru, Capella had settled into a bored silence. In the next second, she took on a mocking tone.

As Subaru raged, Capella spoke.

Capella: “—Indeed, it's annoying and disgusting.”

Facing Subaru's wrath, Capella gave a more pleasant smile.

She clapped her hands together, pointing to the room packed with flies.

Capella: "When you look at a room full of giant flies, you get a horrible sense of physical disgust, isn't that right? And of course, no matter who looks at those ugly creatures, they can't help but want to run."

Subaru: "What... does that..."

Capella: "No matter who, everyone feels disgusted with that ugliness. And those scum have become insects that I can't bear to look at. It's a matter of course that no one would love them."

Subaru: "So, what are you trying to say?"

Capella: "Human beings, however, are creatures that cannot live without loving or being loved. But when their loved ones become such creatures, no matter how much they want to, they just can't love them. In that case, they have to redirect love to others. No matter how reluctant they are, they just can't love anything dirty."

His mind went blank.

Tilting her head slightly, she spoke her monstrous words.

Listening to her clapping, Subaru was overtaken by a desire to escape.

Now, immediately, without hesitating for even a second, he want to disappear to a place without this monster.

His body didn't want those eyes on him, his ears didn't want to hear that voice, his mind didn't want to remember that presence, all in a sense of physical disgust.

Wasn't she the embodiment of aversion?

Something which he was genuinely unable to stand, wasn't that the definition of the horror that stood before him?

Capella: "So gentle and merciful, I really am the perfect woman. Since it was decided that I'd monopolize all the world's love and respect, then I absolutely can not slack on my duty. In order to be loved better, I'll work hard to be loved, and change myself to suit your tastes. In order to capture your attention, I'll take away everything you're interested in everything but me. Loving anyone is okay, but you'll choose me in the end. I'll work hard to make that happen. I'll improve improve better improve improve improve improve improve improve my own charm! And reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce the charm of the meats who aren't me! Anyone, no matter who, would fall for this world's most beautiful and charming me!"

Subaru: "... just, kill me already!"

Capella: "Why? I'm a philanthropist, how could I be so brutal as to kill you? Even if you're worthless scum, if there's a chance that you'll love me, even if

there's a tiny, slight chance~, for every single person, I'll let them live even one more second if they'll give me my due praise! Only those who can't will be killed! Above all, Capella-sama is a commendable praiseworthy woman!"

Subaru: "—"

Subaru: "——"

Subaru: "———"

Subaru: "I see now."

Capella: "Do you? Well, now that you understand, quickly give your appreciation to

Capella-sama. Let yourself be melted by Capella-sama's love and become my favorite piece of meat..."

Subaru: "Go to hell."

He couldn't think. But there was no need to think.

The enemy in front of him was truly the most vicious enemy. Everything other than that piece of knowledge was entirely unnecessary.

Subaru's whip suddenly flew forward. The monster jerked backwards as her

face was suddenly attacked, removing her dirty foot from Crusch. Taking advantage of that opening, Subaru immediately moved, picking up Crusch.

Capella: “Witness— because you wanted that slab of meat, your fluids won’t stop leaking. Didn’t you deny it earlier? Didn’t you say so many beautiful words~? Don’t you like beautiful things? Don’t you like cute things? Don’t you like soft and comfortable things?”

Subaru: “——!”

Chasing Subaru, Capella spread her arms apart, reaching her wrist toward him.

One hand turned into a the head of a snake, while the other became the head of a lion— those distorted heads chased Subaru, showing their canines while crawling up and down the floor of the room.

Although his right foot had begun to bleed again, he still felt no pain. Feeling the body temperature and weight in his arms, making every effort to protect the woman he carried, Subaru focused every last bit of his athletic ability on dodging.

Capella: “Do you care so much for that scum? Then, for the rest of your short life, hold tightly and don’t let go! Those tempting eyes! Those sweet lips! That sweet meat meat meat! Because she’s stimulating, you’re clinging to desperately to her, unable to let go? Die! Die! Go die! Go die right now!”

Subaru: “Do not talk nonsense, bastard! I'm not that kind of person!”

Capella: “Quiet! Scum should just obediently stay put and emanate the stench of rubbish! Sows should obediently stay put and emanate the stench of an animal! You’ve never thought of it? Can you honestly say that you’ve never thought of it for even a second? Doesn’t that one second make it that kind of obscene relationship? What's the difference? What's the difference? Tell me what the difference is!”

The snakes and lions writhed as if resembling Capella’s excitement, wantonly twisting across the room.

The sound of teeth crunching a wooden desk, sending its legs flying, disassembling its body. That same force sought Subaru, trying again and again to reach him.

Caught in the center of that destructive storm, issued a pained cry, Subaru guarded Crusch’s body, desperately avoided the continuous attacks. Capella stood at the exit of the room. Even if he wanted to take the opportunity to escape, Capella's body expanded and contracted, changing back and forth between woman, girl, and maiden, in an anomaly that looked to be taboo.

Capella: “Don’t you want to stroke her hair? Don’t you want to brush her lips? Don’t you want to hold her body? Those cheap thoughts are always justified with beautiful words, with love a shield! Love is beautiful, isn’t that just a self-righteous justification? Aren’t you using beautiful words to cover up your desires?!”

Subaru: “——you!”

Capella: “Admit your lust directly! Don’t try to hide it behind love! Or are you

refusing to say it? Refuting what's already been determined? —My love for her is because of her innermost feelings! Her nobility, her gentleness, her compassion, her temperance, her sky blue eyes. She's willing to live for others, she has the strength to endure injustice, her vulnerability that she shows only to me, I don't want to leave her alone. That reassuring voice, that loving gaze, those eyes that steal my moodiness away, the lips that call my name so gently, the warmth that grips both of my hands, the excitement in my heartbeat when we touch, that beautiful hair swaying in the

wind. Because fate brought us together, because I believe that only she'd accept me, because she's always by my side when I'm sad, because she's taught me so many important lessons, because we've been together for all all all of this time, I want to see and feel the same things that she does from now to forever. Because we promised, I swore to never forget, and only I know her, and only in front of her can I be myself. Because I was so lonely, I always wanted someone to understand me. You told me that that initial thought is what leads one person to love another. You were the one who took away the flow of my tears, you were the one who emerged from the boundless sea of people to find me, you were the one who hugged me tightly when I collapsed, you were one who scolded me for first time because I was naive, you were the one who told me the undisguised truth, you were the one who told me so much that I never knew before, you were the one who took me to see so many sights I'd never seen before, you were the one who took my hand, out of my birdcage in. No matter when, you support me, no matter what, you understand me. We're meant to be together, always, I can't live without you, you're my everything, you love me because I love you too, because your chest is so warm, because with you, all of the colors of the world shine so brilliantly, I can't feel happiness without you, I can't live without you. In this world so filled with lies, only this is truth."

With a still expression, Capella spit those words out as if they were curses.

As she spoke this long, touching confession, Capella's face was intertwined with beauty, adoration, obscenity. And with an even more complex and strange expression,

Capella: “—None of those words are beautiful!”

Subaru: “——”

Capella: “Those are all words meant only to placate others, what’s the harm in removing them? Do they have any sincerity? Any character? They’re merely nauseating nonsense, how annoying! Acts! They’re nothing but acts! In truth, you’ve only been attracted by the appearance of that meat! If you could really feel love with those who you speak affectionate words to and share affectionate touches and pillow talk with, see what happens when they become a fly! Could you love them? Are you not afraid of them? Are you not disgusted? No! You’d feel nothing but disgust oozing from your every pore! Well? Think about what you’ve said!”

Insane verbal abuse, a delusion of victimization, jealousy, hate, self-obsession.

Spit splashing across the room, Capella lost control of herself as she hysterically destroyed the room.

The snake’s hiss, the lion’s roar, Capella’s cries, Subaru couldn’t stand to listen to them any longer.

The noise became like storm, and the room began to collapse. No matter what he did, he couldn’t see anything past the smoke.

How was his foot? Could he still use it, injured and torn as it was? The only thing he was certain of was the heartbeat of the woman in his arms, which continued to infuse Subaru with determination.

But even such a fight would come to and end here.

Capella: “Hey, meat. I can see you!”

Subaru: “—Huh!?”

Breaking through the smoke, the lion's head suddenly rushed in.

Then the fangs snapped at Subaru’s right foot, and tore off a large chunk, blood spurting forth fiercely.

The injury had already directly exceeded the limit that Ferris could handle, and Subaru’s mind began to boil as he struggled through the pain of losing his right foot. He issued a violent cry of agony that his throat was unable to bear.

Of course, he couldn’t support his own body anymore.

As he collapsed, Crusch rolled onto the ground in front of him. And his blood began to overflow. This was no exaggeration. It appeared as if a bucket of blood had been suddenly overturned. It was clear that his life had entered a rapid decline.

Capella: “Ah, what a headache. It seems that I couldn’t help but get excited—how impolite of me. Kahahahaha!”

Subaru: “——”

Maintaining his position on the ground, Subaru stuck one convulsing hand to his wound.

Although the palm of the hand was blocking the wound, the momentum of the bleeding had not diminished. In fact, another feeling began to well up in Subaru’s body.

Soon, everything would end. This was the familiar feeling of Death, a feeling which gradually approached Subaru.

In just a few hours, he’d felt the pain of the loss of his right foot twice.

His face transcended paleness to take on a yellow pallor, and his breathing sped up and up as his eyes grew bloodshot.

Capella: “Oh my, my, aren't you about to die~? Watching the agony this piece of meat is in, is particularly distressing for my compassionate self who feels for others.”

Subaru: “...ah... ah...”

Capella: “The piece of meat that you’ve been protecting is also going to die soon. It’s such a shame that I indulged in my hobby a little bit... and decided to

see if she'll lose to my blood~."

Capella squatted down, glancing at Subaru's twisted, agonized face.

Then the monster smiled and stretched a hand to the wound on his foot.

Capella: "I wonder what kind of ugly meat will you'll become~?"

Subaru: "....."

As she spoke, Capella turned her other hand into a blade, cutting into the hand that had just been caressing Subaru's wound. And, bit by bit, her blood flowed into Subaru. Red and black blended together, blood blend with each other, forming a rather indecent scene.

And,

Subaru: "——!? Hah, ah ah ah ah ah!?"

Capella: "Capella-sama's blood is different from ubiquitous common blood. Mine is mixed with dragon's blood, which contains a great curse~ could you maybe last a bit longer than the other one?"

Capella hummed happily, but Subaru couldn't form any kind of reply.

His entire being was half-dead, and even his pain had become sluggish. Just a

second before he died, the blood that had plunged into his wound ravaged and eroded his body.

As if a foreign body with self-awareness had entered his body, a fear of a much higher degree than that a regional pain ravished Natsuki Subaru, as if attempting to completely rewrite his existence while merging with him.

Unable to understand, not allowed even the mercy of death.

And compared to Crusch? It was as the monster had said. She was suffering the same pain. If she had to endure such a pain, she'd be better off dead! Let us die! Let us die! Let me die! Let me die! Let me die!

Capella: "Gahahahaha! Well, then~ the invaders have been well taken care of. Well, it's about time that I..."

After looking back and forth at the collapsed Subaru and Crusch, Capella stood, satisfied.

She reverted to the petite girl's form, her tail vanishing as she headed toward the broadcast room.

As she turned, she paused.

Her gaze fell on the wall that had been destroyed when the decoy dragon had been attacked.

Capella: "My, my, they were pretty decent after all~."

And, after having fallen from the building only a short while ago, the black dragon had again taken to the skies. Seeing its enemy, it gave a deafening roar, before breathing a mouthful of black flames.

— At that moment, black flames engulfed the city.

Chapter 37: Regroup

A distant, distant echo.

Unfamiliar voices. Or were they familiar voices?

Were they masculine? Feminine? Did they come from above or below?
Everything about that was unknown.

???: “——”

An angry voice.

And a sighing voice.

And also something like an accusing voice.

And was that a crying voice?

Sound.

A waterfall of sound poured down, its rough waves an ensnaring whirlpool.

As if someone had been kind enough to answer a question deeply rooted in his heart.

His turbid identity was swept away, lost to the tides.

Hands and feet, head, bottom, chest, back. Melting, mixing, blending together.

Even his own existence, incomprehensible as it was, was swallowed up by the waterfall of sound, flowing away as if lost forever.

All he knew was the black haze that swallowed the world he could perceive.

It was thus that he realized that the dark haze was disintegrating his body, allowing it no form of resistance, ushering in a steady end.

But an untieable knot was, at this very moment, resisting that erosion.

Even being dismantled, even being shriveled, even being denied, that knot refused to shrink back.

By no means had all of him succumbed to the haze in his body, by no means had all of him surrendered to that dark battlefield.

And finally, finally...

???: “——”

The first noise that flooded into his ears was someone's enraged roar.

While hearing that sharp voice, he opened his eyes to be greeted by a white ceiling. At the same time, he realized that he was lying spread eagled on a hard surface.

???: “—useless!”

His newly regained consciousness brought that angry cursing in with a clearly sound.

It seemed to encompass an outbreak of feelings, and was displayed with some specific action. He heard the distinct sound of a hand slapping against skin.

???: "Stop it! You should understand that the responsibility for that blame doesn't lie with anyone here."

???: “Shut up! I don't want to hear those empty platitudes! An outsider shouldn't interrupt!”

Accusational voices and unquenchable anger.

From what he could hear, allies seemed to be arguing in a spacious room. He stretched out his left hand, trying to support himself with the wall as he got up.

But, halfway through, a nail encountered his skull, and his breathing suddenly stopped. His eyes felt as if they were sticks of combusting dynamite, and his

field of vision was suddenly stained a vivid blood red.

As the impact of the pain ravaged him, he finally pulled his upper body upright, taking in the scene of the quarrel.

—Three men and women quarreled in the middle of a room... or, rather, all three of them were men.

A tearful Ferris was hitting Wilhelm with his fists, while a desperate Julius tried to stop him. The sound that he had just heard was the voice of Ferris fanning to the cheek of Wilhelm. The red-faced old man had bowed his head in shame.

Wilhelm: “From the bottom of my heart, I apologize.”

Ferris: “At least give an excuse! Give me a reason that I can accept it! Just your apology is useless!”

Julius: “Ferris, you're creating a pointless commotion! Calm down! Can't you see that Wilhelm-sama is incredibly remorseful?”

Ferris: “Remorse...!? What's remorse going to do? Useless! Pointless! Everybody, everybody... why this hell is this...? Why couldn't you all think to rescue Crusch-sama!?”

Ferris exploded toward Wilhelm and Julius with another fit of rage, but almost immediately sank to the floor, defeated and weak.

And as the crying Ferris issued a condemnation, the two men could say nothing. Ferris slammed his gloved hands on the ground contemptuously.

Ferris: “Am I supposed to be Blue? ... I can’t even do anything right now... useless, useless, useless useless useless...”

Ferris sobbed as he continued to curse angrily.

This time, however, his anger was directed at himself.

That was another option he could take. After all, no one could interfere with the lament he’d directed toward himself.

Julius: “——”

Ferris’s sobs and Julius’s sighs intertwined. Wilhelm remained silent. The crushing atmosphere shrouded the room around them.

Garfiel: “Yo, Captain. Finally up?”

Garfiel appeared in the doorless doorway, spotting Subaru, who the other three had missed.

Julius followed Garfiel’s gaze and noticed the awakened Subaru, wearing an expression of relief.

Julius: “Excellent. Ferris, Subaru’s finally awake.”

Ferris: “...right.”

At Julius’s call, Ferris swiped at his face with his sleeve as he stood. His disgraceful attitude vanished as he examined Subaru’s body before firmly fixing his eyes on Subaru’s.

Ferris: “Well, you seem to be fine. Your mind is clear, right? Do you know your name and place of birth?”

Subaru: “I’m Natsuki Subaru, from Japan.”

Ferris: “A hometown I’ve never heard of... I was born in Crusch-sama’s territories.”

Ferris's expression revealed that he believed Subaru’s answer to be a pointless joke. He stood and immediately turned to leave. No one was willing to throw accusatory words at him, and so everyone watched in silence.

Only Wilhelm chased after Ferris. Before he left, the elderly man turned to give Subaru a ceremonious bow.

After the two left, the tense atmosphere in the room finally thinned.

But, at the same time, another oppressive feeling grew stronger and stronger.

Garfiel: “Captain, even if y’can get up, ya shouldn’t be forcin’ yerself t’do anythin’ right now.”

Subaru: “...those are my lines, you look like you’re in terrible shape.”

Leaning against the wall, Garfiel greeted Subaru, who responded to the haggard looking teenager with his own greeting.

His cheeks and blond hair were saturated with blood, and his clothing was torn in too many places to count. His pallor was just as awful as when he’d first carried Mimi to the shelter.

As he considered this, Subaru’s own sluggish thoughts finally caught up.

Subaru: “We’re alive, huh.”

Garfiel: “Right. My amazin’ self and Captain survived, so that’s all good ‘n well, but we can’t even celebrate it. Fuck!”

Affirming Subaru’s mutter, Garfiel grinded his teeth down bitterly.

As he watched Garfiel, Subaru once again confirmed his own survival — that is, he understood that Return by Death hadn’t triggered, and that he hadn’t witnessed the end of this struggle in the City Hall.

Of course, since he was still alive, he had to have been rescued, but...”
Subaru: “What's going on in the City Hall? How did I get here?”

Julius: “We’re still in the City Hall right now. The Witch Cult conceded it, and we took back our target. Looking just at that result, we could call the operation a success, but...”

Julius knelt next to Subaru as he began to answer his questions.

Upon closer inspection, the Knight of Knights looked awful. His hair was uncharacteristically messy, and his face and neck were covered with wounds. His knight’s uniform was also dirtied with blood, bringing no peace of mind.

But, most importantly, his normally graceful features were currently twisted with remorse and humiliation.

Julius: “First and foremost, it’s good to see you up again. If anything had happened to you, we would have lost our source of morale.”

Subaru: “... don’t say useless shit like that. What happened? The Witch Cult chose to abandon the building, exactly how did that come about?”

Julius: “As we’ve established, the Witch Cult abandoned the building, and we took back the City Hall. But the hostages that were turned into inhuman things, and the devils who caused all this managed to escape after everything they’d done. This can hardly be called a good result.”

Compared to the anxious Subaru, Julius stated the situation in mellow tones.

However, that stiff tone and those drooping eyes... it was obvious that Julius was explaining their circumstances with irrefutable indignation in his voice.

And, Subaru couldn't ignore what he'd just been told.

Subaru: "Inhuman things, meaning..."

Julius: "You should have seen that unending, nightmarish sight when you were on the upper floor."

Shaking his head, Julius affirmed that cruel reality.

Subaru vividly remembered the shiny red compound eyes and the sound of the wings desperately beating out a cry for help. His nausea was held in check by the knowledge that they'd been looking to him, another human, for aid.

His heart seemed to tighten with a pain that was neither truly sympathy nor fear.

The Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Lust, Capella, was a truly despicable monster who trampled freely on human dignity and values, all while spitting her brand of ridicule.

What that monster played with was neither the human spirit nor the human heart, but something even more sacred.

Julius: "The entire square, from the highest floor to the exterior premises.

After our division of labor to gain time, the Witch Cult had too much of an upper hand.... They could have easily,

little by little, killed us all. The reason why that didn't happened was your keen judgment and the black dragon who fought his hardest."

Subaru: "My... judgment?"

Julius: "The conversation mirror was activated before you made a move on the top floor, and, as a result, the status of the City Hall was successfully communicated to Anastasia and Ferris. The prompt arrival of our reinforcements, the Iron Fang and Ferris, was all due to your actions."

Subaru: "Did you think those kinds of words would bring me comfort?"

Julius: "...that wasn't my intent. I was merely stating the truth. Facts, as it were."

Subaru was irritated by Julius's poised answer. However, Julius's cold reply was also evidence that he himself wasn't calm either.

Confirming that neither's mental state was great, Subaru took a deep breath.

Subaru: "One more thing about what you said just now, what happened to the black dragon?"

Julius: "This happened on the top floor, so I may not know any more than you do... but Lust's power is transformation, right? And surprisingly enough, a man who had been turned into a black dragon made his way to the top of the

building, even as he was on the verge of death, to battle with Lust. We were only able to save you thanks to him.”

The one who Julius was referring to was no doubt the dragon that Subaru and Crusch had so fiercely attacked.

Since Capella's power was variation and transformation, then that black dragon was more than likely one of the hostages in the City Hall. And Subaru had disregarded his call for help, abandoning that man.

And under such circumstances, with the fighting still ongoing,

Subaru: “The one who was turned into a black dragon, is he...”

Garfiel: “He can’t die.”

As Subaru fretted, Garfiel suddenly interrupted with a calm voice.

He wouldn’t meet Subaru’s gaze, instead staring directly up at the ceiling.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self won’t let him die. It’s absolutely impossible for’em t’die here, from such a thing. He must be saved... otherwise...”

Julius: “He’s been like that. The dragon seems to be someone he knows. Although his scent has changed, Garfiel seemed to recognize him from his actions. In any case, his healing is now complete. He’s fine, although a little anxious, but some rest would help that.”

Subaru: “An acquaintance? Garfiel, is this someone you know from the city?”

Garfiel: “— —”

Garfiel’s choice to remain silent came as a surprise to Subaru, who couldn’t catch his gaze.

In any case, he was grateful for the safety of their savior, the black dragon. But the others, the flies, they...

Julius: “The others can be loosely said to be okay, but at least their safety has been assured. Ferris has made his diagnoses, but...”

Subaru: “That is to say, even Ferris can’t fix them? Damnit!”

Unable to help hitting the floor with his hand, Subaru pondered the feelings of those who had lost their bodies.

Exactly how strong of a sense of loss would they be feeling? They’d been turned into something inhuman, a horror and cruelty that is different from the loss of life.

Loss of life simply meant the end of an identity and an existence.

But the loss of human form meant the loss of an identity... while existence had yet to come to an end.

Those who were tortured by that incurable curses were packed into the small office

Were they above him? Or below? Regretting that he couldn't even remember how many were suffering that fate, Subaru could only think of other things that needed to be confirmed.

Since he knew he was still alive, the next question that emerged was a natural one.

Subaru: "Are you and Garfiel both uninjured?"

Julius: "As you can see, both Garfiel and myself were not significantly injured, and neither was Ricardo, although we can certainly say we were humiliated... but that's an afterthought."

Subaru: "——"

Even as he said so, Julius's teeth clenched down on his lip, his voice laced with shame.

Seeing his anger, Subaru was consumed by his own sense of frustrated hatred.

Julius fought against the detestable Gluttony, Alphard.

In honesty, Subaru wanted nothing more than to destroy that one archbishop. But even supposing that Subaru had stayed to fight him, his escape would have been completely inevitable.

But he couldn't remain calm, knowing that his sworn enemy had escaped.

Subaru: "...sorry that I couldn't finish the task assigned to me."

Julius: "If you insist on saying so, I can't refute you... they achieved their broadcast, it seems."

Subaru: "Right, and that applies doubly for Lust. And... right, I'm sure they discussed some kind of requests or negotiations in their latest broadcast."

And, from Julius's expression, Subaru could tell that Lust's request hadn't been anything proper.

Although he didn't want to hear it, blocking it out would be pointless. He'd have to learn it sooner or later. But, before that...

Subaru: "Broadcast aside... what happened to Crusch-san?"

Julius: "——"

Subaru: "She also went to the top floor with me... and she ended up in a worse position than me, suffering at the hands of Lust for much longer..."

An image of Crusch spitting up blood, with only the white of her eyes showing, flashed through Subaru's mind.

Her external injuries were severe, and the damage was appalling. Presumably, something life-threatening must have happened.

And Ferris's anguished cries. Although he didn't want to believe the worst, the most obvious conclusion was...

Subaru: "Ferris... said something unfortunate sounding, so..."

Julius: "It's certainly true that Crusch-sama is still alive, but..."

Subaru: "Don't phrase it with those implications!"

In that brief moment, Subaru felt a small light of hope in his chest. However, it vanished as soon as he saw Julius's expression.

That was an intolerable expression which expressed not the peace of mind at finally saving a life, but one which conveyed terror of a even worse fate.

Julius: "Ferris was overreacting slightly, but this situation is certainly an undesirable one."

Subaru: "Undesirable... What the hell is going on? Crusch-san... if Ferris can't do anything, why aren't we putting our heads together and trying to help!?"

Julius: “Calm down! No matter how worked up you get, the situation won’t change. So calm down already.”

Julius snapped sharply at Subaru’s disgraceful outburst.

But his calmness would only serve to fuel the present Subaru’s rage.

Subaru: “Bastard, how the hell can you be so calm! We lost so soundly, to that lot! How can you not be angry!?”

Julius: “—Of course I’m also boiling with rage!”

Julius sharply swatted aside the arm that Subaru had stretch forward. Subaru fell silent as he saw Julius’s gaze waver while he roared.

Julius: “...Apologies for my unbecoming anger. It seems that I’m yet to be mature enough to control myself.”

Julius reached out a hand to Subaru, who had lost his balance after his arm had been forcefully blocked. Although he’d clearly understood Julius’s feelings, Subaru had deliberately attacked his attitude, and he felt ashamed as he heard Julius’s apology.

Subaru: “Crusch-san, she...”

Julius: “...was attacked by Lust, right? A foreign agent has contaminated her body and is currently wreaking havoc. Ferris’s reaction is almost appallingly

overwhelming.”

As Julius spoke, Subaru recalled a clear image of Crusch’s incredible pain in the last moments of his memory.

That ultimate pain, where her body had been infiltrated by a monster, which siphoned away her own flesh, blood, bones and even soul. That pain was one which no one should ever bear.

But she had, and Subaru immediately placed this as the reason for Ferris’s attitude earlier.

Before and after Subaru’s awakening, Ferris seemed to blame Wilhelm. Presumably, he held the old swordsman accountable for being unable to protect their master on the battlefield.

In fact, he was only searching for someone to carry the blame. Both the accusing Ferris and the accused Wilhelm understood this.

So Wilhelm remained silent after Ferris had attacked him, which Ferris secretly cried over his own weakness.

The two men who had just left the room were with their suffering master now.

Thinking about that trio, the sense of failure in Subaru’s heart only grew stronger and stronger.

Julius interrupted Subaru's melancholy.

Julius: "—Subaru, there's something that I have to confirm."

Subaru: "What is it?"

Julius: "Although it's rather difficult for me to point this out... it seems that you haven't noticed yet."

Subaru felt a wave of doubt at Julius's careful euphemism. His eyes narrowed slightly as Julius raised a hand to his leg.

Unsure of what Julius was doing, he looked down carefully... to where Julius's hand traced a line from Subaru's thigh to his right foot.

Subaru also involuntarily followed with his eyes.

Subaru had inadvertently only recalled his memories of Crusch at the top floor of the City Hall, and had completely forgotten about his own injuries.

What had happened before he'd lost consciousness?

He'd unconsciously understood and accepted the presence of Return by Death — but that feeling of death hadn't come. He should have been relieved, but...

Subaru: “What? This is—!?”

His breath suddenly catching in his frozen throat, Subaru couldn't help but doubt his own eyes.

His eyes were telling him that his right foot was still attached, but...

Where his foot had been detached was a seam of black, ugly, charred looking skin. And that darkened skin had spread throughout his right foot.

Julius: “It wasn't Ferris who fixed it, nor was it any type of healing magic. Your foot... the one which had been torn apart... fixed itself. And it doesn't even look as if it hurts.”

Subaru: “——”

It was as Julius had said.

His ugly right foot felt neither pain nor a sense violation. His first instinct was to wonder if it only maintained the illusion of being connected, but he could freely bend his knees and move his toes.

Every wound on his foot had turned black, and the blackness ran visible in his blood vessels, stretching across the upper and lower parts of his right foot.

Julius: “Subaru, I'll have to confirm it with you again.”

Subaru: “.....”

After seeing the dramatic changes in one's own feet, Subaru could not even speak.

For Julius’s question, Subaru can only slowly lift his head, and then ...

Julius: “Is it really... completely fine?”

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The most terrifying thing about the reattachment of his right foot was... there was no obstacle preventing him from standing and walking as he pleased.

Garfiel: “Th’ nee-san named Ferris said that Captain’s foot was neither injured nor sick, so even ‘f my amazin’ self tried to use healin’ megic, nothin’ would happen. It wasn’t supposed to be somethin’ curable.”

Rolling up the leg of his pants, Subaru would see that his leg was laced with black blood vessels. The embroidered patterns appeared to be flexible to the touch. If he ignored the color, he could call the skin normal, but...

Julius: “Did you reattach it yourself? ... That’s the only thing that would assure me right now.”

Needless to say, however, Subaru possessed no regenerative powers. This was the second time he'd lost that foot, and his own memory told him that the first time it had happened, his foot had shown no signs of repairing itself.

Of course, the proper line of thought to follow was to figure out what had caused this, but Subaru could think of only one thing.

Subaru: "Is it because that bitch Capella dripped blood onto my leg...?" He'd descended into a realm of confusion after his foot had been taken off.

For that reason, his memories were blurred, and he couldn't conclude for certain that this was indeed the case. However, Subaru had no doubt that he'd seen Capella her cut into her own wrist and scatter drops of blood about.

At that time, she had also mentioned something incredibly concerning. Yes, it was... Subaru: "Crusch-san... she suffered the same thing that I did."

Julius: "That being... having blood dripped into her wounds? It's an unpleasant act. Maybe it has some significance as a ritual... leaving behind an immediate impact? Or perhaps it's a curse, which doesn't operate under the laws of regular magic."

Subaru: "Curse... yes, curse sounds right. The curse of blood... no, it was something different... something like... dragon's blood? Right, it's the blood of the dragon. That's what she said!"

As Subaru gazed at a puzzled Julius, he sifted through his foggy memories, and couldn't help but clap his hands together at his success.

That bastard Capella had indeed mentioned, while torturing Subaru with her blood, that her own blood was mixed with dragon's blood.

That hadn't seemed to be a jest, a bluff, or a lie. And it provided several clues.

Julius: "Blood of the Dragon... does that mean that she received it from the royal family?"

Subaru: "I don't know of the details, but is there something that convenient really on hand?"

Julius: "It was one of the treasures granted by the contract with the dragon Volcanica, famous for being potent enough to even turn barren soils fertile again."

Subaru: "The almighty dragon's blood... I don't know how relevant it is, or what it implies."

Considering that Capella had called herself a Lugunica, this was an object of concern, especially, as Wilhelm had said, due to Emerada Lugunica being a real historical figure.

She couldn't really be of royalty, could she? But the dragon's blood being mixed with her blood stirred questions.

Julius: "Anyway, it's good news to know that it might be blood-related, Ferris might be able to help her with that information."

Subaru: "Ah, that's right. Let's hurry..."

Garfiel: "Wait, Captain. Don't go with him."

Finally, there was information that may lead to a turnaround.

Subaru wanted to rush to share that information, but Garfiel, arms crossed as he leaned on the wall, had poured a metaphorical bucket of ice cold water over his head. In response to Subaru's accusatory glare, Garfiel dropped his gaze.

Garfiel: "Captain hasn't seen it yet, 'n the fewer people see, th'better."

Subaru: "...what does that mean?"

Garfiel: "It means what ya think it means. That pretty nee-san won't like it'f ya see her."

Garfiel turned away from Subaru's probing gaze.

Growing increasingly uneasy, Subaru instead turned to Julius, who, like Garfiel, only shook his head.

Julius: "In fact, I'm afraid that Crusch-sama is very much hoping to avoid the gaze of others right now. Because she's a noble person, so she doesn't want anyone to see her in such a weakened state."

Subaru: "Is it... really just because she's weak right now?"

Julius: "——"

Julius says nothing.

He merely quietly turned his gaze from Subaru. And just that one small action answered everything.

Subaru: "...it's all my fault."

Julius: "Subaru, that's—"

Subaru: "It's all my fault! I... obviously, I should have known better than anyone else how underhanded they can be! I should have foreseen at least some of this!"

What was happening to Crusch? The more he tried to imagine, the more horrified he became.

And the intense self-reproach those thoughts brought to Subaru... those were a product of his anger at his own incompetence, as well as of their own anger, as well as courage and regret to go to challenge.

The Witch Cultists... Subaru knew of their awful natures, right down to his

bone marrow.

And it wasn't just Petelgeuse. Before entering the City Hall, Subaru met Sirius and Regulus firsthand, in rapid succession. After those encounters, how could he have underestimated Capella?

Was it his arrogance in deciding to fight back even at a disadvantage? This had all happened because of his judgment.

Subaru: "A-All mine..."

???: "—That's enough. Whether you're cryin' or complainin' it's really becomin' quite bothersome, so would ya mind stoppin'?"

Subaru, bearing all the blame, was about to sink deeply into the sea of self-loathing.

At this moment, however, it was not a gentle voice who guided him from those dark thoughts, but a cold, apathetic one which was accompanied by a frigid gaze.

Subaru: "——"

He turned to the entrance of the large room.

Standing there with her hands clasped together, under the gaze of everyone in the room, was a purple-haired businesswoman with a gentle face.

However, the lethal glare she fixed on Subaru was completely out of character for those gentle features.

Subaru: “Anastasia...”

Anastasia: “I don’t misunderstand disappointment after a defeat on the battlefield, but if all ya do is mope and complain, you’ll disturb those around you like a fool. Even if you do all that, the losses you’ve taken won’t return to ya.”

Anastasia’ reprimands were directed toward Subaru, who had been crushed by defeat.

For a second, Subaru was too stunned to understand. As he began to react, he found his mind swimming with rage, but,

Julius: “Anastasia-sama, please retract your statement. Subaru was the one who had the most direct contact with the sinners of the Witch Cult. Even if he’s moping or sighing...”

Anastasia: “How unlike ya, Julius. You can usually focus on the issue at hand, but right now you’re being so precocious... if you came here just to play with your friends, you might find that Joshua suits you a lil’ better.”

Julius: “.....”

Julius, who had attempted to defend Subaru, withered under that frosty sight.

Subaru's white-hot rage cooled somewhat, but he still felt incredibly confused about Anastasia's attitude.

Then, looking at the antagonized Subaru, Anastasia fiddled with the fox-fur scarf around her neck and spoke to the other two occupants of the room.

Anastasia: "...Hey, Julius, things with Crusch-san seem kinda busy right now, don't they? Why don't you see if you can go and help? And, blond child over there, would you mind accompanying him?"

Urging Julius and Garfiel from the room, Anastasia fixed her eyes on Subaru.

If two of the four people in the room left, a confrontation between only Subaru and Anastasia would happen.

Anastasia: "Don't worry, I won't do anythin' untoward."

Anastasia promised so with a decidedly uncute smile.

Julius bowed and left, and Garfiel trailed behind him, a cautious light in his eyes. Until the very end, he kept his concerned gaze trained on Subaru, before giving him a nod and leaving.

Anastasia: "Garfiel-kun seems to be quite the dutiful boy. Until the very end, his worried gaze was fixed on Natsuki-kun. He seems like he takes good care of people."

Subaru: "...I'm sure you didn't get me alone just to gossip."

Anastasia began quietly chattering about Garfiel as he left. This had happened in a previous interaction, where she'd been intending to catch Subaru off of his guard.

Subaru turned to see Anastasia stroking her hair as she surveyed the half-destroyed room, before lifting a chair and seating herself.

Anastasia: "My, having a leisurely chat like this with Natsuki-kun really takes me back... all the way to the eve of the battle with the White Whale."

Subaru: "Back then, we were scheming a plan for success. This time, nothing like that is in sight... Even though we recaptured the City Hall, the situation hasn't improved at all..."

Anastasia: "Yes, nothing has changed. Everything's gotten worse, and we have no optimal course of action to follow..."

Subaru realized that her carefree voice had, for a second, honed itself into the razor sharp blade of a knife.

He couldn't help but straighten his back, while Anastasia glanced at his foot.

Anastasia: "Is there no problem with your feet? Last I heard, it had been shredded."

Subaru: "Fortunately, I can run and jump just fine, although this looks kind of

gross.”

Anastasia: “Well, being able to run and jump right now is what matters most. After that, there’ll be a lot to do, but until then...”

Anastasia let the conversation drift lightly toward Subaru’s injury, before inhaling sharply.

Subaru realized that she was finally arriving at the point and frowned. She pointed her hand at the ceiling— no, through it.

Anastasia: “Did ya ever end up hearin’ the third broadcast?”

Subaru: “No, I didn’t, what did they say? ... it was probably some kind of request right?”

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun missed two of the three broadcasts, how careless.”

Anastasia giggled softly, holding a hand to her mouth, and Subaru put on a unhappy pout. Even so, she kept her hand over her mouth, and narrowed her eyes.

Anastasia: ‘The demand that was given— it seems that only Natsuki-kun and I could understand it.”

Subaru: “Only me... and Anastasia-san?”

What exactly did that mean? Subaru's mind swam with questions.

He'd never felt that they particularly held anything in common. After all, this was their first time engaging in such an interaction.

With such a shallow relationship, what exactly did they...

???: "— My my, Ana, there are times when your manner of speech is demoralizing. Sometimes it ends up only serving to annoy others, you know. Isn't that exactly the case here?"

Subaru: "— —!?"

The voice of a third person suddenly echoed in Subaru's ears.

This voice belong to neither Subaru nor Anastasia. Instead, it felt lighter and more neutral.

Subaru toured the room with confused eyes, but there was not a single unknown figure in their surroundings. Julius and Garfiel had left, and showed no signs of reapproaching.

Where in the world had that voice come from?

Anastasia: "Ya say that, but don't ya do the same thing I do? Look at poor Natsuki-kun. He's in such a chaotic state of confusion right now."

???: “Oh, that won’t do at all.”

Subaru: “That, who is...!?”

Anastasia spoke to the third voice as if all were natural.

Rather than relieving Subaru’s frenzy, he verged on hyperventilating as he demanded “what’s going on?”

???: “You do seem quite frightened, my apologies.”

Subaru: “——”

His eyes fell upon it.

Suddenly, the owner of the other voice intruded loudly into this scene.

No, that third voice hadn’t intruded. It had been in this room since the very beginning.

In fact, it had entered the room with Anastasia.

Echidna: “I’m Echidna. Well, I say that, but what I really am is an artificial spirit.”

Subaru: “Echi—!?”

“It” smiled deftly at Subaru, who was busy being swept away by shock.

Lips curling up on both sides, eyes narrowing slightly. That should... probably, be something like the imitation of a smile.

—Wrapped around Anastasia’s neck, her scarf of what appeared to be faux fox fur beamed.

The witch whose name he couldn’t forget had just revealed herself to be a spirit.

Chapter 38: The Witch Cult's Proposals

As Subaru gazed at that thing—eyes wide in shock, he momentarily forgot how to breathe.

Echidna: “Although I had been anticipating this response, it’s still a little rather overwhelming. Although I look like this, I am, by gender, a woman... well, no I’m a spirit, so it’s difficult to

determine whether or not I have a gender. Maybe I should just say that I identify as female?”

Snow white hair and sharp black eyes.

A neutral voice, and twisting, crafty words. Those characteristics brought to mind that black and white witch, whose personality was consistent with this fox’s.

Subaru: “What a... bad joke. You’re saying that you’re Echidna?”

His first encounter with the Witch of Greed had been before a Trial in Sanctuary’s tomb, when she’d lured him to one of her tea parties.

She’d enticed her guest with sweet words in an attempt to turn him into a puppet, dancing on her strings. And, on top of that, she wanted to borrow him to seek all the answers that she herself could not witness. She could be said to be curiosity incarnate.

She was someone who Subaru had never imagined he would see again.

Subaru: “You... actually turned into a fox? Stop screwing around. And appearing right during this moment of crisis, what are you scheming this time?”

Anastasia: “Wait a moment, stop jumpin’ to conclusions and listen!”

Subaru had recovered slightly from his initial shock, ready to bring retribution upon this white fox in front of him who was claiming to be Echidna. However, at Anastasia’s reproach, he was cut off.

Subaru’s hostility toward the white fox also turned to Anastasia, who paraded around nonchalantly with that scarf around her neck.

Subaru: “Don’t screw with me! Don’t bullshit me! You're ... what's with her? ...was she deceived her? After all, she shouldn’t be out of the sanctuary.”

Anastasia: “I don’t really know what you’re going on about, but it’s been about a decade since I first met Echidna... and since then, we’ve barely ever been separated. Isn’t that just a little mismatched with your story?”

Subaru: “A decade ago...?”

The thought of that witch having planned so long ago to wantonly flutter about in the world outside lit the fires of rage deep inside Subaru.

According to Echidna's own testimony, she hadn't originated from her dream castle. So, if from even before that point in time, she'd planned something like this...

Subaru: "You're always like this... do you get a kick out of watching people flail around in the dark while you laugh at their ignorance?"

Echidna: "... My, my, it seems that I'm being detested through and through. Although I'm sure that this is all troublesome for you, it seems to be some kind of inexplicable misunderstanding."

Anastasia: "Yep, it's just as Echidna's said."

In contrast to the Subaru's fierce anger, Anastasia and the white fox exchanged a calm, understanding glance.

The arctic fox who made Subaru frown shook her head in an unexpectedly human manner.

Echidna: "Although I have no clue whatsoever as to where your distrust of this other Echidna stems from, I would say that those issues don't relate to me."

Subaru: "What do you mean?"

Echidna: "It's simple indeed. I don't know anything about any Echidna outside of myself, since I was born knowing nothing except my name, Echidna and my race, artificial spirit. Those are my only clues to my origin."

Subaru: “—what?”

He'd been expecting some sort of explanation, but the arctic fox spoke silly words unsuited to what Subaru knew of Echidna. Or, rather, if she really was Echidna, than anything she said could very possibly be misleading words meant to trick Subaru.

Claiming to be both an artificial spirit and Echidna, although this spirit said that she had no previous recollection of Subaru, he couldn't just carelessly believe her.

Anastasia: “What is it? Natsuki-kun's expression is full of nothing but suspicion.”

Subaru: “Of course, for me, who knows Echidna's true nature, this reaction is only natural. You too should... right, my bad. Echidna's saying she doesn't remember anything, right?”

Anastasia: “It seems that you have absolutely no intention of believing in it... ah, in this situation, where we're operating on a time limit, that really is a headache.”

As opposed to the vigilant Subaru, Anastasia spoke in her usual casual tone.

Echidna was working with her— just that alone was enough for Subaru to become wary of Anastasia. And although he respected both Julius and Ricardo, his degree of trust in them may need to be adjusted.

Subaru couldn't allow himself to feel too much hope that the master and the subordinate did not hold the same opinion on this.

Subaru: "Why'd you tell me your name, if you don't have any memories? Aside from trying to gain my trust? Was it supposed to convince me that you aren't her?"

She'd given him her name and a little of her origin. Didn't that prove that she was the Echidna

Of The Tea Party? Which meant that she was not the Echidna In The Coffin, who

Roswaal was seeking. There was no doubt that she was the one Subaru had met. In that case, there were a mountain of questions he wanted to demand from her.

That said, he understood that this was not the time for those questions.

However, facing the impatient Subaru, Anastasia sighed tiredly.

Anastasia: "It seems things only got so rowdy because Natsuki-kun missed the broadcast."

Subaru: "The broadcast from the Witch Cult? How is it related to this?"

Echidna: "—because one of their requests was Surrender Your Artificial Spirits.

The white fox answered the question simply.

The content of that request left Subaru's mind blank as he struggled to comprehend the ramifications.

The broadcast, the Witch Cult, the artificial spirits. That was to say— Subaru: "Could it be that..."

Echidna: "Although it's something uncomfortable to believe, they want our artificial spirits... that is, they want that girl who accompanies you. So isn't it only natural that we should approach you for a chat?"

Subaru: "How did you know that Beatrice is an artificial spirit?"

Echidna: "I noticed the moment I saw her, is all I can say. I'm not quite sure how. But I think that she, too, would be able to recognize me on sight. Maybe it's some kind of spirit detection?"

With a more cautious attitude, the white foxed answered Subaru's questions one by one.

At the very least, when Beatrice had encountered Anastasia for the first time at the hotel, she hadn't mentioned anything about the white fox scarf. However, it was very possible that Beatrice had noticed something, but, unsure of how accurate her sense had been, hadn't voiced her concerns out loud.

Why did she have to carry all those burdens alone? Subaru turned to ask her, and immediately felt a sharp pain, as if someone had stabbed him in the heart.

Echidna: "That the child by your side couldn't detect me properly can't be helped. I have many defects as a spirit, and I can't tie a decent contract with anyone. I can't even use combat magic smoothly. Although, to compensate for this, I'm confident in my ability to hide my presence, and this confidence is presently undiminished."

Subaru: "Can't form a contract... then, you and Anastasia..."

Anastasia: "This child and I don't share the relationship of spirit and contractor. That relationship requires something completely different... That is to say, we're accomplices."

Echidna: "I want to witness this child's future, so that's why I'm following her around like this.

Having been with her for a few years now, we've become something like conversation partners.

From time to time, she even discusses her business matters with me."

The arctic fox spoke with a fleeting grin, and Anastasia lightly scratched at her neck. Their relationship seemed harmonious, and Subaru presumed that they shared a certain degree of trust.

Subaru: "Why... would you disclose your internal affairs unrelated to the battle at hand...?"

Echidna: “Isn’t it natural that we’d disclose some of our own affairs if we want to gain your trust? Furthermore, with the lives of the entire city’s population hanging in balance... at this

critical juncture, it falls to us to take action. It wouldn’t do to fall into internal strife due to the cloaking of a small, relatively insignificant detail.”

Anastasia: “I also really wanted to stop her, but... this child doesn’t heed advice from others at all after havin’ made up her mind, so... I’d like for you to at least hear her out, for the time being.”

Echidna was unusually frank and genuine, and Anastasia’s supplemental words were convincing. Belatedly, Subaru realized the reason for Anastasia’s earlier coldness; she’d taken on that demeanor to create an environment where she could catch Subaru alone.

Along with that, in order to successfully persuade Subaru, she’d deliberately ushered Julius and Garfiel from the room.

Anastasia: “Of course, I won’t comply with the Witch Cult’s requests, but I will require Natsuki-kun to stand by my side in regard to the artificial spirit. Otherwise, even if we outwardly reject their proposals, not everyone will accept our stance so easily.”

Subaru: “I have no intention whatsoever to listen to anything that bunch has to say, so I strongly agree... but that doesn't mean that all my doubts about that fox Echidna have been put to ease.”

Anastasia: “You’re so particular about names. Does the Echidna you know really have such a poor character, Natsuki-kun? If so, it’s rather troublesome to see you treat my Echidna in such a way.”

Subaru: “I’ll apologize if it’s someone else entirely, but her attitude and speech patterns are almost identical... and...”

Anastasia: “And?”

Subaru searched for the words to explain to the confused Anastasia.

The nature of the existence of artificial spirits was unclear to Subaru, but he did know that Beatrice and Puck were both made by the witch Echidna.

Of course, if the white fox were truly an artificial spirit, then she must also have come from Echidna’s hands.

In search for an eternal life, Echidna had designed an artificial replica of herself.

Many of her words were of suspect trustworthiness. But if everything she’d said had been true, then the conclusion that Echidna had Become An Artificial Spirit was reasonable.

Casting away her flesh, freed from the notion of lifespan as a spirit— if she could extend her existence through this manner... this would certainly fit with that Witch of Greed who longed

for omniscience.

So... the white fox was The Artificial Spirit Named Echidna, without doubt. However, her claim that she had no memories— was that true or false?

Anastasia said they have been together for more than a decade. However, that alone was no reason to believe her. It would come as no surprise if she'd been plotting something for a decade.

If someone were to say that she'd been planning all that for this exact moment... Subaru wouldn't have a hard time believing them.

Anastasia: "Hey, hey, he seems to be starin' rather fiercely."

Echidna: "Such intense hatred makes me really curious about this other Echidna, but I suppose we should set that topic aside for now. Whether or not he believes us isn't relevant. By the way, Ana, shouldn't you tell him what's going on already?"

The arctic fox spoke with a defeated tone, accepting Subaru's suspicious grudge. And Anastasia, at her urging, shrugged and clapped her hands together, picking the conversation back up.

Anastasia: "Well, now that your doubts have been sorted out, the most pressin' matter is the Witch Cult. They made three other requests."

Subaru: "Three other... so, a total of four?"

Anastasia: “Yes, which is the total number of the remaining archbishops. Since most of their requests were rather mockin’ in content... try not to be offended.”

Mocking demands... once again, they had gone too far.

The Witch Cult had somehow defied Subaru’s notion that his impression of them couldn’t grow any worse.

Anastasia pet the tail of the arctic fox with her hands.

Then, licking her lips, she said...

Anastasia: “The first requirement is The Surrender Of Our Artificial Spirits, from Gluttony.”

Subaru: “Gluttony...”

Anastasia: “Although I have much to say on that, I’ll save my commentary for later. Next is Wrath. —She wants the Book of Wisdom that was brought to this city.”

Subaru: “——hk!?”

At yet another unexpected shock, Subaru involuntarily widened his eyes.

And seeing that, Anastasia narrowed her lightly colored eyes.

Anastasia: "Seeing that reaction, I'd say that Natsuki-kun knows something about this?"

Subaru: "....."

Anastasia: "No worries, that's excellent. It's been troublin' me quite a bit. Echidna doesn't know anythin' and neither does Julius."

Subaru: "... that fox really said that she doesn't know anything? Even though it's the Book of Wisdom, huh."

Anastasia showed a slight smile. After all, before this, she'd been puzzling over something she had no clue how to find. But now, she'd found a glimmer of hope. Of course, that smile carried nary a hint of cuteness either.

Echidna: "No, I'm afraid I don't know anything... then, if you'll allow me to speculate... the Echidna you know is connected to this Book of Wisdom, correct?"

Subaru: "Yes, exactly right."

Echidna: "In that case, I'd have to ask even if I didn't want to know. What kind of person was your Echidna? Did she have some kind of connection to the Witch Cult?"

Although Subaru believed that she wasn't feigning ignorance, he felt that Anastasia and her white fox were speaking as though she were someone who

shared an unusual relationship with one of their clients.

Of course, given their way of thinking, this was inevitable.

If you he were to believe what the arctic fox said, the name Echidna referred to her existence alone. Only Subaru knew that the artificial spirit's creator, Echidna. And, more importantly, this proved that only the name of the Witch of Envy had been recorded into history.

Subaru: "—Echidna... is the name of a witch from a long time ago. In addition to the Witch of Envy, other wicked witches existed, and she was one of those. Although she's long dead, her soul remained anchored here. Having met her before, I'm now very wary of her."

Anastasia: "Hey, Natsuki-kun, do ya have a fever? You're speakin' some rather outrageous words here."

Subaru: "There's nothing wrong with my head. Those witches are incomprehensible, twisted existences. They can even create artificial spirits, so just accept this much."

Echidna: "In that case... then this Echidna could be said to be my parent, huh."

Subaru's answer was sprinkled with implications, and the white fox drew meaning from words that surely sounded reckless. Although he wasn't particularly trying to hide anything, Subaru felt a twinge of regret at not being upfront with her.

Echidna: "At an unexpected time, discovering the secret behind my birth is

one of the many joys of life. If you have a chance, be sure to tell me in more detail.”

Subaru: “... although you’re a spirit yourself, you’re so obviously clueless about the existence of artificial spirits. Our Beatrice seems to know much more than... no, come to think of it, she’s

never mentioned anything about you to me. Where did you come from, and what were you meant to do?”

Echidna: “Regretfully, all that remains unknown to me, whether it be the circumstances of my birth or the purpose I was made to fulfill. —Yes, that’s all a mystery to me. Right now, I’m merely following the path of this rather interesting child.”

At Subaru’s accusation, the arctic fox cast a meaningful sideways glance to Anastasia, who slowly moved her gaze to Subaru from the sidelines.

Anastasia: “I’m also quite curious about the connection between Echidna and the witch. And she... cannot be unrelated to this witch. So, let’s return to the topic of the Book of Wisdom...”

Subaru: “The Book of Wisdom is the origin of the Witch Cult’s gospel... that is, it’s the full version. The Book of Wisdom uses the same principles of the Dragon Stone.”

Anastasia: “The same as the Dragon Stone... then, their credibility would be incredibly high. Is it possible that the witch made the book herself?”

Subaru: “That’s what she implied, but the two existing copies should have been burned. If more copies were ever made, then I don’t know of them.”

Echidna had given copies of her Book of Wisdom to Beatrice and Roswaal. And both of their copies had, for certain, been destroyed a year ago.

Beatrice’s Book of Wisdom had crumbled to ash along with the Forbidden Archive. And Ram had burned Roswaal’s Book of Wisdom, rejecting the future recorded within it.

Anastasia: “But that’s just what you’ve heard from the witch Echidna. Would her words really reflect the truth of the situation?”

Subaru: “There is that...”

Although unhappy that Anastasia had simply denied his assertion, Subaru himself also understood that the credibility of that statement wasn’t high. However, he didn’t think that Echidna had lied about that.

Presumably, only Subaru, who had spoken to the witch face to face, would have such a feeling.

Subaru: “——”

Anastasia: “Not trusting the person, but trusting her words. What a troublesome person for Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “I myself think so, too... I obviously didn’t intend to trust her, but I trusted her words, how contradictory.”

Echidna’s every action had been a cleverly scripted, meant to coax Subaru into becoming her puppet.

However, that didn’t mean that everything had been a lie. Did Subaru believe that because he wanted to? Or was he still under the sway of that witch?

Anastasia: “For the moment, regardless of your personal feelings, we can come up with three possibilities about this Book of Wisdom. The first is that the witch is lying, and other copies were made.”

Subaru: “And the second is that the Witch Cult doesn’t know that the Book of Wisdom no longer exists, and is just messing with us, but the third one is?”

Anastasia: “Unless she lied, then there’s only one way the Book of Wisdom could still exist. That is, one of the copies wasn’t destroyed completely, and there are remains left.”

Subaru: “—Wha...”

That the Book of Wisdom may have left remains was something that Subaru hadn’t considered at all.

Anastasia shook a finger at the dumbfounded Subaru.

Anastasia: “Although it's not something clear-cut, the book was made by a witch, wasn't it? Couldn't we say that it would probably be difficult to destroy, and maybe even capable of regenerating itself?”

Subaru: “Indeed, I really can't say that that's impossible... but the real question is, who would have found and kept a restored one?”

Anastasia: “If you didn't see with your own eyes that the book was burnt, and it was last seen somewhere easily accessible... maybe I'm overthinking, and the second hypothesis is far more likely, but, in either case, we won't accept their proposal.”

Anastasia faced Subaru with a dainty hand placed over her mouth, citing various possibilities.

Who could have access to the remains of a Book of Wisdom...? The one in the archive was certainly completely gone, along with the entire Forbidden Archive itself.

But what about Roswaal's book? Although he'd heard that Ram had burned it with magic... but, in this case, it should have turned to ash, and been buried under Emilia's snowstorm.

If any remains were left, there was certainly someone who could have picked it up, but...

Subaru: “If anyone had brought it here, it would be someone from my faction, and they would all have told me. Therefore, I'm confident that the Book of

Wisdom isn't in city."

Anastasia: "In that case, it doesn't matter. I don't need to devote so much concern to a book I know nothing about."

Confident— although he'd said so, his feelings were perhaps closer to wanting to believe.

However, Anastasia did not dwell on this point, nor did she intend to dig deeper into the details of the Book of Wisdom. Rather,

Anastasia: "Then, the next demands are from Greed and Lust. Plain and simple, there's absolutely nothing worth discussing about their words.

Subaru: "Those two... no. Gluttony and Wrath are no different. So, what's going on? What did they say?"

Capella of Lust was undoubtedly the worst of the bunch.

And before he'd even met Capella, Regulus had injured his right foot and kidnapped Emilia, so Subaru bore a number of negative emotions for him. He was unpredictable, which worried Subaru.

Anastasia: "Here's to hopin' you won't get too angry about it."

Subaru: "I'll do my best, but we'll see."

Subaru's response to Anastasia's uneasy opening remark was immediate.

With an expression of 'if you put it that way', Anastasia sighed.

Anastasia: "Lust's proposal isn't the same as the others, and it seems to simply be a mockery..."

Send Twenty People Who Love Each Other To The Central Waterway. —They Absolutely Won't Be Harmed. Somethin' like that."

Subaru: "That lying bitch! The hell does she mean, they won't be harmed!? Did she forget that she's someone who turns people into flies and dragons for fun!?"

As always, Subaru grew furious when confronted with Capella's evil deeds.

Twenty people who loved each other— just thinking about what that monster sung of such ugly love would do to them was terrifying."

Anastasia: "From I could tell, that archbishop doesn't consider changing someone's form to be 'harm'. 'I won't hurt anyone~' is more along the lines of her exact words... I almost felt like I could see her speak. Well, next would be Greed's demand..."

Subaru: "....."

Subaru choose to remain silent, angrily waiting for Anastasia's next sentence.

However, seeing that attitude, Anastasia seemed to find it difficult to continue, hesitating for an almost exaggeratedly long time.

Then,

Echidna: “The request of the man calling himself Greed was, I want To Hold A Wedding

With My Silver-haired Bride. So, In Anything Related To The Preparation Of The Wedding, Don’t You Dare Hinder Me!”

Anastasia: “Echidna...”

Echidna: “Ana seemed to have a hard time saying it, so I do hope it was alright for me to move things along.”

In the stead of the hesitant Anastasia, the white fox guarding her neck spoke.

However, the understanding between the two was currently completely irrelevant to Subaru.

—Hold a wedding with a silver haired bride.

And who would be the bride of Regulus of Greed? The question didn’t need any consideration at all.

Subaru: “—STOP FUCKING AROUND!! BASTARD!!”

Therefore, Subaru’s volcanic eruption of anger was entirely reasonable.

Anastasia couldn’t help but frown, and the white fox’s hair stood up on end.

That was how direct and pure Subaru’s rage was.

In his mind, the image of a white-haired man took form.

The ignorant, supernaturally powerful man, had captured Emilia, and insisted that her only value lay in her face.

But that powerful man was nothing more than sick in the the head. What nonsense was he spouting this time?

Subaru: “Beatrice! And The Book of Wisdom! And Emilia! They say they want them? Hah! The Witch Cult isn’t getting their hands on a single one of them! I’ll show them for messing around with that bullshit proposal!”

Anastasia: “...I anticipated that reaction, but hearing ya say it so crisply like that really is reassurin’.”

Seeing Subaru’s passionate appearance, Anastasia smiled along as well.

Not due to a happy mood, but because that same passion was rising in her as

well,

Anastasia: “Our artificial spirits... well, I have no intention of turning Echidna over to them. In

addition, I refuse to allow the Witch Cult to intimidate me. I brought Cruschan and Emilia into this city, and the Witch Cult dared to have them suffer so... I won't be able to face either of them again if I don't get us out of this!”

Echidna: “Oh, Ana, you're so militant.”

Anastasia: “That's precisely because I know how to level the playing field so we can claim victory. We absolutely can't escape right now. Because we're sure to crush that Witch Cult and force them to pay reparations.”

Calculating misfortunes, reputation, victories and losses.

Her clever words glossed it over slightly, but Anastasia's spirit showed not the slightest intent of retreating from the battle.

Unlike Julius, Garfiel, Wilhelm, or even Ferris, she could be accused of only being able to speak with recklessness due to her lack of personal experience with the horrors of that sinful cult.

However, Subaru did no such thing.

In this case, there was absolutely no need to say anything that would needlessly damage their morale. And even more importantly, her presence, as

vengeful as it seemed, was undoubtedly trustworthy.

Anastasia: “Everyone has to agree with that sentiment, at least slightly. Having said that, they’re still a few steps ahead, but who could accept this end! We’ll look for excuses for failure when in some other world!”

Subaru: “——”

Anastasia: “As long as we’re still alive, there's still a chance. And we absolutely cannot give up our lives! That would be far too tragic.”

A gentle smile rose on Anastacia's face as she declared her will of steel.

The pressure emanating from her petite form could have anyone forget that she was no warrior, who was experienced with exposure to the presence of the battlefield... no, that was wrong. She

was, in fact, a warrior of hundreds upon thousands of battles.

Having chosen wits as her battlefield, she was a battle-hardened warrior.

Anastasia: “Whether it’s Crusch-san, or the people who have lost their human form, if we can get our hands on Lust, she should be able to undo what she did. And Natsuki-kun, your beloved princess was stolen away. This isn’t a pill you can swallow, right?”

Subaru: “Like you need to ask! Emilia is my bride! I’ll get rid of that bastard Gluttony, and take

Rem's memory back! I'll find that long-winded Sirius and knock her teeth out!
And I'll drag

Capella here and force her to apologize and change everyone back before
beating her senseless!"

Echidna: "My, Ana and Natsuki-san are both treating the impossible like it's
easy. But, truly, that's the thing I find most encouraging about you."

Subaru echoed Anastasia's forceful declaration, and, seeing their spirits, the
arctic fox nodded with satisfaction.

The first and second battles had ended in failure.

But the next battle was ahead of them. No one would die, and they would let
no one die.

In the end, they would survive, victorious. That would be their triumph.

Anastasia: "Ricardo is standing guard, and Joshua is looking for other lost
children. He should be back shortly. And then, again, we'll hold a full-fledged
strategy meeting."

Subaru: "We also need to reconfirm the situation throughout the shelters and
near the other towers."

Anastasia: "That won't slip my mind. Hey, it looks like my mind is finally

restarting.”

Since they had decided to do what they needed to, their hearts would be steeled with determination. That was the natural way.

While nodding at Anastasia’s words, Subaru turned his gaze to the outside of the City Hall.

From his vantage point, all he could see were the lofty water towers.

There was no way to distinguish between east, west, north and south.

So, each one could hold Emilia, Rem's memory, a sworn enemy, or a loathsome monster.

-In this city, the battle to save those precious loved ones, continues.

Chapter 39: Knightliness And The Man Who Was Late

After the conversation in which they renewed their resolve, Subaru and Anastasia headed down the stairs of the City Hall.

The large room where Subaru had been laid down was on the third floor— — exactly halfway up the five-storied building, which apparently, was once a meeting room.

[Anastasia: Since the top floor's been burned up by dragon's breath, the fourth floor is the top floor now. All the victims of Lust are assembled and waitin' there]

[Subaru:If the top floor has been burned, what happened to the broadcasting device?]

[Anastasia: That thing's safe. It's been taken down and put away. The arcane device itself is shaped like a big metal box so it can be carried on a mount. Apparently, the sounds collected in the box would get picked up by other devices installed in the city]

Like an antenna, or more like a speaker?

A metal box plus speaker: something like a set-of-two arcane device. The fact that they've safely retrieved both the hostages and the arcane device was some sorely-needed good news.

[Subaru: You said the affected victims are all gathered on the fourth floor, right?]

[Anastasia: Despite bein' turned into fruit flies and dragons, they still retained their human awareness. So they can understand us and follow our instructions.Though I can't say if that's a good thing or bad thing]

[Subaru:]

Retaining one's awareness through all this, Subaru couldn't say for sure whether he'd consider it fortunate, either.

Consciously being turned into an insect from head to toe and becoming a completely different lifeform isn't something "depressing" could sufficiently describe. Surely, it would entail the loss of one's "self" as well.

Losing one's body, and continuing on as something else entirely, would it really be possible not to lose one's identity as well? Perhaps, only those who had actually experienced it could answer that question.

[Anastasia: They can still move their bodies. So thankfully, no one's killed themselves. Everything happened so quickly, there're some who still haven't accepted the situation.I'd be glad if we can keep them safe until everything's settled down]

[Subaru: Kill themselves..... you mean suicide? That's.....]

[Anastasia: You don't think it's somethin' to worry about?]

[Subaru: — — — —]

It wasn't a question Subaru could answer lightly.

It was just that, compared to Subaru, Anastasia seemed to be far more comfortable with calmly considering countermeasures in the face of these extraordinary circumstances.

[Anastasia: There's hope as long as they're alive. Though, even while the body lives, if the heart dies, hope will collapse as well. So just staying alive isn't enough. They must also have the will to live, no matter what]

Keeping his eyes forward as he walked, Subaru heard Anastasia say this without seeing her face.

But, in terms of her resilient view on life and death, Subaru wholeheartedly agreed.

And so, to that end,

[???: Anastasia-sama]

Downstairs, seeing Subaru and Anastasia walking down to the first floor, Julius, who was the first to notice their arrival, called out the name of his master.

To Subaru, the first-floor reception lobby was just a place he had briefly

passed through. But, even to him, the marks of the desperate battle that had been carved into the lobby struck him with such a deep impression that he could vividly sense the fierce struggle that had taken place here.

The desks and chairs, and even the wall were littered with sword strikes and magical spells, while, all over the floor, bloodstains scraped by footprints asserted their existence.

Though regrettably, Julius had let “Gluttony” escape, all these signs showed that it wasn’t for a lack of trying.

[Julius: How was the conversation with Subaru?]

[Anastasia: It did drag on a bit, but it ended quite well, I guess. Same as us, Natsuki-kun is pumped full of motivation too, so.....]

Playfully nodding to Julius’ question, Anastasia turned her gaze to the back of the room.

Opposite from the stairs Subaru and Anastasia had just come down from, at the lobby entrance was Ricardo, heaving his gigantic figure. Just as Anastasia had ordered, he had been outside trying to make contact with other survivors.

[Anastasia: Welcome back, Ricardo. How’s the situation outside?]

[Ricardo: Ya sure look like yer in pretty good spirits, miss. It’s bad as it gets. It’ll probably get worse with time, too. Those bastards sure got some talent for messin’ with people]

Frowning in disgust, Ricardo snorted at the fruitless result of the search.

He roughly scratched his canine head and gestured to the members of the “Iron Fang” crowding around him, instructing several of them to head out again while telling the others to rest in a corner.

[Subaru: How is the Witch Cult messing with people? No, I mean, I know there’s already nothing more messed up than this situation we’re in, but are you talking about something else?]

[????: Th’broadcast, gen’ral. Talkin’ ‘bout those fuckers’ broadcasts]

Emerging from the side of the stairs, Garfiel answered Subaru’s query.

Listening to Garfiel clacking his fangs in frustration, Subaru asked,
[Broadcast?]

[Subaru: You mean the one where they transmitted their demands? Aside from that, did they say anything else?]

[Julius: Nothing over the top. Just announcing that all forces attempting to retake the City Hall have been dealt with. The Sin Archbishop of Lust must be the one making them. Their words were truly despicable]

[Ricardo: Thanks ta her, the people in the few refuge-shelters I showed up at all have barely any spirit left. Won’t be easy, convincin’ them to rise up t’ take back their city]

Julius firmly closed his eyes, while Ricardo scrunched up his nose.

Hearing their answers, Subaru more or less understood what that remark about “messing with people” meant.

Along with her demands, Capella had announced the defeat of Subaru’s forces upon occupying the City Hall.

Naturally, for the citizens who couldn’t even lift a sword, news of the defeat must have shattered their hopes, while those who did have the strength to fight would soon realize the importance of the assault on the City Hall, and the reason Subaru and the others had committed to this early attack.

At the same time, they would realize that such an assault required considerable forces, and that, even with such forces, it had failed nonetheless.

In other words, regardless of whether the people in the refuge-shelters had any strength to resist or not, Capella’s broadcasts were set to break their spirits.

[Ricardo: From the City Hall records, we already know the location all the refuge-shelters. But still, after visiting the nearby shelters one by one..... well you can guess what the result is]

Ricardo swung out his arms and directly confirmed Subaru’s fears.

It was only human nature. There was no point in blaming Ricardo for failing to convince them. When it came to depravity, the Witch Cultists had no equal.

[Anastasia: No strength to fight, no courage to resist. In that case, what comes next'll be even more dangerous]

Beside the rueful Subaru, Anastasia touched her chin, muttering.

Seeing Subaru raise his head at her voice, Anastasia tilted her head with [Right?]

[Anastasia: "You can't win even if you fight", once a person believes this, they'll lose their will to fight. So then, what do you think people'll do next?]

[Subaru: Fall into despair and feel scared... that's not the answer you were looking for, is it?]

[Anastasia: Well it'd be cute if they just held their knees crying. But, it won't be like that. Even if they lose the will to fight, they haven't lost the will to live. In that case, what choice is left to them?]

[Subaru:You don't mean]

Subaru was starting to catch the drift of what Anastasia was saying.

At the same time, an unbearable disgust at the Witch Cult's machinations rose up inside him.

As if to confirm the conclusion in Subaru's shuddering mind, Anastasia clapped her hands together.

And,

[Anastasia: The conditions for their survival were already presented to them. In the form of demands, too. So, it stands to reason that there'll be some who'd try to meet those demands out of desperation. The "Artificial Spirits" and the owner of "The Book of Wisdom", even the "Sacrificial lovers and couples" wouldn't be out of the question, you know]

[Subaru: There's no way people could turn that extreme, right!?!]

[Anastasia: Maybe not. Maybe there'll be those who refuse to sacrifice others just so they can survive. Or those who'd try to escape the city at all costs..... either way, the ensuing chaos is inevitable]

Once panic is allowed to fester, this precarious balance would come crashing down in an instant.

It was too frightening to imagine what the Witch Cultists would do to this city once that happens. They'd be granted the ultimate authority to erase everything that everyone had worked for.

Like some tyrant's switch that could cast it all to the wind with a finger's flick.

[Subaru: So before that happens, we'll just have to keep trying to get through to them..... right?]

[Anastasia: That's not very realistic]

[Subaru: But in reality, that conclusion is just way too pessimistic!]

When everyone is afraid, panic will begin to take hold.

And when that happens, the only way to fight it is to give hope.

[Subaru: “We are preparing a counter-attack.” If we announce that, at least we can give everyone some hope and keep panic at bay, right?]

[Anastasia: At the very least, I think we have to be prepared for the necessary casualties to come. I don't like to think about it, but we must consider what will need to be done once those people become irrational]

[Subaru: Wait, Anastasia-san. Why do I get the feeling we're not talking about the same things here?]

Getting a bad feeling about where Anastasia might be going, Subaru twisted his lips. Seeing this, Anastasia let out an exhausted sigh,

[Anastasia: Natsuki-kun's idea of disallowin' any sacrifice whatsoever, while pretty, has no basis in reality. The moment we took such crippling losses from the start, winnin' without pain or loss was already impossible. That should be self-evident]

[Subaru: For the first, and second times..... that's true. But preparing to sacrifice people is not the same thing at all. That's not what it means to avert disaster before it happens, is it?]

[Anastasia: If what you said can lead us to overall victory, I will agree with you. But, that's not possible. When a ship sinks, only the ones with the courage to swim will survive.While the ones who stay inside and let themselves sink like stones will never make it]

[Subaru: ——! Winning or losing is...!]

[Anastasia: If we lose, we'll all end up at the bottom of the sea! If you don't like winnin' or losin', then would you rather live or die!? If you think you can save everything and everyone, then you are too naive, Natsuki-kun]

Anastasia shouted over the agitated Subaru.

Just when Subaru was about to take a step towards her, Julius stepped in and held him back. However, Julius's gaze was not on Subaru, but on Anastasia. As if to show that he was siding with Subaru, Julius narrowed his eyes,

[Julius: Anastasia-sama. I understand your feelings. But I also agree with Subaru. Assuming your worries are justified, we should take measures to prevent it. But callously harming civilians will cause you great pain..... and it would be playing right into the Witch Cult's hands]

[Subaru: Julius...]

Openly opposing his master, Julius asserted his ideal of righteousness as he placed his support behind Subaru. Alongside his surprise at Julius' remark, Subaru also felt strengthened in his convictions.

If Julius, the constant embodiment of Knightly ideals, agreed with Subaru, then there could be nothing wrong with what Subaru had said.

However, Anastasia only softly patted her scarf in front of Julius, and,

[Anastasia: Did you think it's because I like it that I suggested abandonin' all those people? It's not like I think everyone in the shelters would go crazy and start riotin'. In the end, it's only a possibility. But it's a possibility we can't ignore!]

[Julius: But.....]

[Anastasia: I am not a child, do you hear me? We have to make full use of what resources we have. We absolutely must strike back at the Witch Cult. And we will do everything that is within our responsibility. But if you extend that responsibility to everything, then that's far, far too broad, it'll only be damaging our chances of doing what we are actually capable of doing]

To Julius, who was ruefully biting his lip, Anastasia's words were cold and unforgiving. And while they were directed at Julius, they were also berating Subaru for his thoughtlessness.

Of course, there was no way Subaru had not understood what Anastasia was saying.

It's a heavy burden, to save someone.

It's difficult enough to save one person at a time. But the wider the range expands and the greater the number grows, the less realistic it becomes, and

the more likely there will be an unsatisfactory result.

This is natural arithmetics that even a child can understand.

The more appas you try to hold, the more likely they are to fall from your hands. Not to mention the possibility of stumbling, or your arms giving way and dropping everything.

[Anastasia: What we need to do now is discuss how to win. Not stand around sulkin' like children. Do you wear your badge of Knighthood so cheaply, that you can't even tell the difference?]

[Julius: ———]

Listening to Anastasia say this as if to test him, Julius closed his eyes.

But behind him, seeing his clenched fists slowly lower, and his head begin to drop, Subaru realized that Julius was about to withdraw his objection.

Yet,

[Subaru: If you back down now, you'll be even less worthy of being a Knight]

[Anastasia:Natsuki-kun, have you been listenin'? If not, then you haven't changed a bit from back then in the Royal Palace. After everythin' you've been through and bein' decorated as a Knight, I had expected more from you]

[Subaru: Yes. I am a Knight now. And it is because I am a Knight that I can't back down. I absolutely can't]

The more appas you hold, the more likely you are to drop them.

But Subaru was a Knight, and Julius was a Knight, and in their arms, they weren't holding appas, but something far more precious.

These weren't inanimate fruits that wouldn't hurt even when dropped, but something that could cry and feel outrage—— these were human lives.

[Subaru: Giving up right from the start and letting prejudice get the better of you, well I won't have it. I'm sorry, but I'm not that susceptible to the common sense of this world]

[Anastasia: You're sayin' somethin' incomprehensible again..... it was the same with the White Whale, and same with the Witch Cult after that. All wars have casualties. After all that, are you going to object to their deaths as well?]

[Subaru: Don't underestimate them, Anastasia. Everyone who fought and died back then had already made up their mind. When someone dies, it's sad, and even though they didn't want to die, they had the resolve. Whether a person has the resolve to die or not—— that's what makes all the difference]

He knew that it was just a convenient argument to make, and that there was no logic to it at all.

But still, the fact was just that. Placing oneself into a life and death struggle always comes with a certain resolve.

[Subaru: The people of this city had no obligation to make that kind of resolve. It was those bastards who had one-sidedly turned this place into a battlefield. And we'd be wrong if we let them decide what comes next]

[Anastasia: Even if you don't like it, they'll still attack people whether they have that resolve or not. When that time comes, what difference does it make?]

[Subaru: There is a difference. It's fair for one person with that resolve to fight another person with that resolve. To be a Knight is to constantly hold the resolve to protect those who haven't made that resolve. That's my definition of a Knight, and that's what I bragged to the kids in the village as well]

After being decorated as a Knight and receiving some compliments here and there, the thought just naturally occurred to Subaru.

And once he had made this boast to the children, and saw their fawning, glittering eyes, Subaru was determined not to disappoint them.

Of course, it also had something to do with Emilia's shimmering eyes while she listened at his side.

[Subaru: I am Emilia's Knight. And I want to fight for Emilia. But that doesn't mean I can just protect Emilia while ignoring everyone else. Anastasia-san, Julius is your Knight. He wants to fight for you more than anyone in this world. But that is not enough. These vain creatures called Knights are all greedy as hell, you know]

[Anastasia: ———]

[Subaru: We'll keep on posing until the day we die, Julius is the same, too. If you ask why, it's because this guy is the "Most Perfect Knight". Which means this guy loves posing more than any one of us]

Leaving Anastasia stunned speechless, Subaru shot Julius a thumbs-up. Immediately, Julius, who had been quietly listening, winced in dismay.

Seeing this rare dumbfounded expression on Anastasia and Julius's faces, Subaru's lips twisted into a rather inappropriate grin.

[Subaru: It's clear and simple why we're killing those bastards, but if we have to take on the guilt of forsaking someone in order to do so, then that's just plain stupid. We will save everyone, as well as wipe those bastards out. Even if we end up losing because of our convictions, that's how we'll do it]

Giving up a possibility from the start is not the same thing as failing after having tried.

It wasn't hard at all to see that it was all just self-satisfaction, but,

[???: ——Livin' for self-satisfaction, that's gotta be the most human way to live there is. I'm sidin' with the bro on this one]

[Subaru: ——!]

While Subaru was busy weaving his naive idealism, a completely new voice

mixed into the conversation.

Surprised by the addition of that voice, everyone's faces simultaneously turned to the lobby's entrance. Standing there, the person in the crossfire of everyone's gazes gave an uncomfortable shrug,

[???: Oyoy, if you all keep shootin' me with that sweaty gaze, I'll feel troubled, y'know. I know I ain't much to look at. So I'm afraid I won't really meet your expectations]

[Subaru: ——Al]

Using his jokes and gestures to show that he means no harm, it was a man wearing a jet-black helmet—— one of their close acquaintances to have gone missing since their parting at the inn this morning: Al.

Donning his usual clothes and his usual air, Al looked around the room,

[Al: Are these all the old faces in the City Hall? I thought there'd be more?]

[Subaru:They're with Crusch-san upstairs. More importantly... where've you been?]

[Al: Me? Oh yeah, I ran like hell and found a corner to hide in the moment the trouble started. I popped out to have a look once I saw the situation's calmed down a bit. Then I heard the broadcast too, and came to the City Hall hopin' I'd find my'bro or someone who knows what's goin' on here]

Showing off his astonishingly happy-go-lucky optimism, Al answered while making metallic creaks fiddling with his helmet. Listening to this, even the others couldn't help but be put off by his answer.

It was the kind of disdain towards someone who chose to save their own skin even though his friends were severely in need.

[Al: Hey don't look at me like that. It's not like it was my fault that I was late? I mean, I'm sorry for not bein' there, but that was totally a case of bad luck, y'know? Besides, I doubt one more guy like me would've have made a difference]

[Garfiel: Oy, gen'ral. Th'hell's with this guy. 'S he fuckin' with us?]

Watching Al say it with a shrug, Garfiel, who had been irked from the start, was nearing his limit.

Come to think of it, Garfiel and Al had never actually met. When Priscilla showed up at the inn and shattered everyone's amicable atmosphere, Garfiel wasn't there, either.

So in his eyes, Al must've been some strange man who just showed up out of nowhere.

[Subaru: Wait wait, Garfiel. That guy's Al. He's Royal Selection candidate Priscilla's Knight. I haven't told you yet, have I, but all five candidates are gathered in the city right now, and.....]

[Al: Correction, bro. I'm just Princess-san' lackey, not'er knight. I wouldn't

wanna get stuck with uptight title like that. Oh, no offense, bro]

While Subaru was calling to stop Garfiel, Al corrected him with a sarcastic jab. Seeing that attitude only made Garfiel grit his fangs while blue veins popped out of his forehead.

[Anastasia: Alright that's enough! That's enough! It's just gettin' more and more confusing so can all of you please shut up!?!]

Before their banter could escalate any further, Anastasia clapped her hands to turn back the mood.

Then, with her round eyes glaring directly at Al,

[Anastasia: Showin' up all of a sudden and goin' straight to messin' up the atmosphere, you're just like your master, aren't you? Flauntin' your personality defects will only make people think even less of you. Just stop]

[Al: Ouch... the truth can kinda hurt, y'know. But, too bad that's just how I am. People're always tellin' me I get on their nerves. I guess screwin' up people's rhythm can be a survival technique as well]

Sticking his finger through the gap between his helmet and his neck, Al said while scratching the back of his head.

Meeting his rebuttal with a sigh, Anastasia turned to Subaru,

[Anastasia: Things have just gotten more complicated, but my position isn't

going to change. We have to accept the premise that sacrifices will have to be made, and from there, we can start plannin' towards victory. If you don't want there to be civilian casualties, Natsuki-kun, then start thinkin' about how you are goin' to achieve it. Even though I say this, I don't want to see more deaths either]

[Subaru: Then, you won't mind if I go check out the shelters, will you?]

[Anastasia:You're free to use your time as you like. Either way, our need to bolster our forces hasn't changed. If you find anyone in the shelters who can fight, get them to tag along]

Although reluctant, Anastasia withdrew her opposition to Subaru. Having her outright agree would simply be too much to hope for. So in this case, he had no complaints.

[Anastasia: Take the Communication Mirror with you. We'll be in contact, but for now, let's set the deadline for your return to be six hours from now. Be careful, we mustn't make any mistakes from now on]

[Subaru: Deadline, huh... I forgot to ask, but, what time is it?]

[Julius: It's still the same day, just approaching midnight. ——Counting from now, we only have nine hours]

Julius told him the time limit in Anastasia's place.

If they hold the next strategy meeting in six hours, in practice, he would only have three hours free to use as he wished. He would need to find a way to

convince Anastasia within that time frame.

Then, they would have to come up with the manpower and plan needed to defeat the Witch Cult and destroy them before time runs out. Only then, would the city be saved. Or rather, that alone is not enough.

He will have to retrieve Emilia. Reclaim Rem's memories from Gluttony. Restore the people transformed by Lust to their normal forms. And only then, would their victory be complete.

[Subaru: We don't have much time. Do you have a map of the refuge-shelters?]

[Anastasia: Yes. Take as many copies as you need. We've marked out the ones where Ricardo and the kids of the Iron Fang have already visited, as well as ones being checked on now]

Anastasia gestured to Ricardo, who handed Subaru the map of their route. From the markings over the brand-new map, Subaru could see that the Iron Fang had started from the furthest shelters and made their way backward.

Considering the state of Subaru's leg, it was a great help that only the nearest locations remained.

It was almost as if they had thought of this beforehand and left these for him on purpose.

[Julius: Subaru, I'll go with you]

[Subaru: Julius... no, you better not. While it'd be nice to have more people on hand, it'll be a problem if we don't leave enough fighting force in the City Hall]

Subaru rejected Julius' offer on the grounds that it would leave the City Hall too vulnerable.

Ricardo would go back to patrolling, and Subaru already intended to take Garfiel with him. Even though there was still Wilhelm upstairs, it would be too heavy a burden to leave the protection of the City Hall to him alone.

Besides, there was already a dark cloud looming over Crusch's camp at the moment.

Hearing Subaru's answer, Julius regretfully nodded in agreement.

It had always been rare to see him losing his composure like this. Subaru lightly patted Julius on the shoulder and jerked his chin towards Garfiel.

[Subaru: Garfiel will come with me. And we'll see if we can find any more fighters in the shelters. We'll try to contain the panic while we're at it]

[Garfiel: Y-yeah, got it. Leave it t'me]

A bit late to notice Subaru's invitation, Garfiel quickly drew in his chin and nodded.

Getting this confirmation, Subaru spread out the map in his hands, and, with

the City Hall at the center, he began to wonder which side of Priestella he should begin with.

Their first priority should be securing their combat strength—— that is, to find out what happened to Reinhardt.

[Al: If possible, can we look in the shelters close to the inn first? I think Princess-san couldn't have gotten far from there]

[Subaru: In that case, it'll be closer if we go through this..... wait a minute]

With his finger on the map, Subaru suddenly stopped to look at Al who had waltzed his way into the conversation. Seeing Al tilt his head looking confused, Subaru pointed his finger at him, and,

[Subaru: You're... coming too?]

[Al: Yeah? I'll be kinda troubled if I have to go alone. And I'll be even more troubled if I don't find Princess-san. After all that's happened, you aren't gonna make me wander out there all by myself, are you? With things as they are, I'm scared something might happen if we don't find her soon]

[Garfiel:Just th'perfect master-servant love, ain't it, oy]

As unproductive as this sentiment was, Subaru was genuinely glad to have one more person join him. Hearing that Al was coming along, Garfiel made a disgusted expression, but, at this point, he was ready to set aside his misgivings for now.

As much as it irked them, there was no doubt that they wanted to save Priscilla.

[Subaru: As for Priscilla... I saw her in the park on First Street about fifteen minutes before the chaos started. In that case, she'll probably be in a shelter nearby]

[Al: Really? That's some powerful information, bro! Let's start from there!]

Overjoyed at the new information, Al violently slapped on Subaru's back.

And, just like this, accompanied by a cheerful Al and a scowling Garfiel, the three of them left the City Hall on their expedition to the shelters.

All the while, watching them from behind as they left——

[Scarf: Looks like we've been totally made into the bad guys...]

[Anastasia: Shush, scarf-fox. And it's not like I haven't thought it through..... but if Natsuki-kun can say the same when he comes back, then he's just not capable of thinking at all]

With a tired expression on her face, Anastasia whispered, while her scarf softly shuddered.

And no one else would notice this brief exchange between them.

Chapter 40: The Erosion of Wrath

There were 25 shelters in each district of urban Priestella, totaling 100 in all.

Following Al's suggestion to start their search from the First Street where they'd have the best chance of finding Priscilla, the three of them proceeded with the greatest possible caution to avoid any confrontations.

[Al: Still, aren't we goin' a little overboard? I mean, we got the lil'bro with us, so there's no reason to be scared, right bro?]

[Subaru: This is not being overcautious. When our strength is limited and we're facing such an overwhelming enemy, we can't let down our guard for a second. Besides, it's not just the enemy we need to worry about, we also have to be careful not to excite the others]

While he disagreed with Anastasia in the City Hall— the possibility that the people's anxiety would escalate into violence could not be ignored.

And so, Subaru's plan to patrol through the shelters was both to recruit able fighters while verifying the situation as well as to contain the spread of panic.

[Al: Aw... when you put it that way..... Well I got no complaints about pickin' the safest route. Since if we ever get into a fight, we'll have to rely on the lil'bro here]

[Subaru:You've been saying this a lot, but are you really sure you can't fight? I mean you made it to City Hall alright?]

[Al: If I had to choose between "Can fight" and "Can't fight", I'd choose "Can

fight”... But even then, I’m still bound by human limits. If I have to go against guys whose strength’re way beyond humans, I’ll end up dead in the corner of the screen like a minion within seconds, y’know. No no no, that’s way too reckless]

Screeching the hinges of his helmet, Al flapped his right arm in an expression of his helplessness.

Although somewhat dissatisfied with that attitude, Subaru could understand where he was coming from. Regardless of how much effort, there were just heights that could never be reached.

When it comes to surviving in this world, maybe the cards were already dealt the moment you were born. No matter how much you train your body, you just wouldn’t look at Julius or Garfiel, much less Reinhardt, and think: “I’ll definite catch up to them one day”.

[Subaru: But, that’s not a reason not to fight, right?]

[Al: It isn’t? I thought havin’ no chance to win is more than enough reason not t’fight? But yeah, guess it’s different when it involves leavin’ somethin’ important behind... but I just ain’t that kinda character, y’know?]

[Subaru: ———]

[Al: Don’t be mad, bro. Your high-minded ideas are fine and all. But they’re just not for me... That’s all]

With both of their minds already made up, it’d be futile to continue this conversation.

Seeing Subaru fall silent, Al apologized for souring the mood, when he noticed

something that made him lift up his face. On the other end of his gaze was Garfiel, who had returned from scouting out the path ahead.

Almost without a sound, with all four limbs on the pavement, Garfiel scrunched up his face,

[Garfiel: I dunno... there's nothin' at all in th' three streets ahead. It's so quiet its fuckin' creepy. It's empty, but that just makes it more suspicious]

Garfiel sniffed, as if sensing that something was off.

They had wanted to avoid fighting. But not encountering anything they had expected was even more worrying. It was a precarious feeling, but this was no time to be hesitating,

[Subaru: It's troubling, but there's no helping it. The shelter is right up ahead. Let's just get to it for now. The road is safe, right?]

[Garfiel: My nose n' eyes ain't pickin' up anythin'. Shit, this's weird]

Scratching his short blond hair, Garfiel frustratedly kicked at the ground.

Subaru nodded, while Al shrugged showing no objection.

It had been fifteen minutes since they left the City Hall, but contrary to their caution, they got here entirely without incident. At worst, they were even prepared for the streets to be lined with occupying Witch Cultists. "Disappointing" would be an understatement.

[Al: I'm kinda surprised, but it seems the Witch Cult didn't bring many followers on this raid, did they?]

While running, Al looked around as he made this comment about their circumstances. Subaru turned to him and asked, [What makes you say that?],

[Al: It's simple, there're way too few scouts watchin' the place. You feel it too, right? Compared to how efficient they were capturin' all the key points in the city, they're way too slack with the defenses. Same with how they're lettin' the resistance do as they please. If they really wanted their demands met, they shouldn't have done it like this]

[Subaru: Closing off the areas to ensure that their demands are met would've been safer, huh. Then why do you think they didn't do this? Is there something else they want?]

[Al: I wouldn't know anythin' like that... Or, well, if I have t'guess.....]

Although Al was about to let the topic drop, seeing Subaru turn him a stern gaze, he made what must've been a wry smile inside his helmet, and, after spending some time in thought,

[Al: —Gettin' their demands, not gettin' their demands, it doesn't really matter, does it?]

[Subaru: Huh?]

[Al: If they were serious about their demands, they'd have taken better care of the details. But I think you 'n I agree that they left the hole so big that the wind's just blowin' through..... So, they can't be takin' their demands seriously. If they're met, that's good. If they aren't, that's good too. Feels like that]

[Subaru: What the hell..... then they're just messing with us, aren't they.....!]

[Al: Well yeah. That's what they do, isn't it?]

Subaru fell speechless as Al casually replied.

At that last question, Subaru swallowed a breath, unable to refute it.

——It was just to mess with them.

But, considering the deviousness of the Witch Cult, it was nothing to scoff at. The way they somehow always seemed to be getting the upper hand in this siege was indeed full of questions.

In the assault on the City Hall, it was almost as if Capella and Alphard were lying in ambush, waiting for them, and yet the absence of Sirius and Regulus meant they weren't committing all of their forces, same goes for the fact that they didn't kill any one of Subaru's companions.

And now, with how they were making no attempt to defend the city they had captured only further proved that they weren't taking optimal measures for their apparent goal.

[Garfiel: Captain! Don't listen t'a guy like that. And you, if y'fill th'Captain's head with any funny ideas I'll bash yer head in, yeah?]

As Subaru was sinking into thought, Garfiel shouted to him from the side. Then, turning his vicious gaze from Subaru to Al, running beside him,

[Garfiel: Goin' on and on about that incomprehensible bullshit. Just shut up,

y'bastard who can't even fight! I don't care what they're fuckin' plannin', but I'll just be sure to crush'em, mash'em, n' send'em flyin! That's all y'need t'know!]

[Al: Aw, that's kinda extreme, isn't it? I admit I'm useless fightin' those guys head-on, but it's too much to be sayin' it doesn't matter what they're thinkin'. Or are you sayin' it'll be more trouble if we found out what they want?]

[Garfiel: ——You!]

With the shrill sound of gritting teeth, Garfiel stopped his sprint as if shaving into the ground. At the same time, Al stopped as well, as the two stared at each other in a perilous atmosphere.

Immediately stepping between them, Subaru pressed his hands against both their chests,

[Subaru: Wait! What're you guys doing? This is not the place to fight amongst ourselves!]

[Garfiel: He ain't one of us, Captain. This guy ain't nothin' good. It'll be best we dispose of him here]

[Al: I try to stay away from fights when I can, but I'm not gonna go the peaceful non-resistance route against a guy who wants my blood, you know]

Garfiel cracked his knuckles while Al clicked his neck.

And seeing their belligerent attitudes, Subaru was just about to explode.

Feeling seething rage stabbing the insides of his chest, it was all he could do to keep himself from beating those two to death, when——

[Subaru:this is weird]

Instantly snapping out of that near-murderous rage, Subaru held his head.

That was way too huge of a leap in thought. Besides, what was he thinking, directing this kind of hostility towards his allies?

It was as if he was being driven mad by those two's argument in front of him——

[Subaru: Unless.....]

Just as he couldn't explain the unhinged emotions inside him, at that thought, a chill ran down Subaru's spine. Indeed, he had felt that sickening sensation many times before.

[Subaru: We're being affected... because Sirius is nearby.....!?!]

Stiffening his cheeks, he commanded himself to stay conscious as looked around him.

There was no sign of that abomination in sight. No trace of her shrill voice, either. Yet that faint sense of nausea was weighing heavily on his body.

[Subaru: Hey! Garfiel, Al, stop this! Take a deep breath, calm down. You've also noticed it's strange why you two're suddenly at each other's throats, right? It has to be the influence of "Wrath". It's making us lose control of our emotions]

[Garfiel: Hah? What're y'talkin about, Captain. This's because this bastard's

pissin me off..... no, wait]

[Subaru: ————]

Garfiel held his face with his palm, trying to digest what Subaru had to say. He slowly shook his head, blinking several times,

[Garfiel:No kiddin'. Feels like I wasn't myself just now]

[Subaru: That's the power of "Wrath". But, just to confirm... you're sure there are no enemies nearby?]

[Garfiel: No smell, no sign of'em..... there's no mistakin' it. Unless...]

It was precisely because he was so confident in his own senses that Garfel was so disturbed by that thought.

In other words, the range of Sirius' Authority must be far beyond what they had imagined. If that monster was indeed at the Control Tower, then the range of its Authority would cover almost the entire city. Though of course, this was definitely different in degree compared with what he felt in the Plaza.

[Al: Huh. So that's what it feels to have your emotions toyed with. Not somethin' I'd want to experience again, that's for sure. Guess now I've seen how bad it can get]

Like Garfiel, Al shook off that momentary hysteria and muttered.

He turned to Subaru, and, with a jerk of his jaw,

[Al: But, bro. Doesn't that mean it'll be bad news if we don't hurry?]

[Subaru: What're you saying?]

[Al: Well, we had you to notice it first, and once you told us, we snapped out of it too. But the others won't have that. If this spreads throughout the city..... I doubt the ordinary people would be able to keep their heads]

[Subaru: ——hk!]

With the worst possibility flashing across his mind as soon as Al pointed it out, Subaru looked at Garfiel. And Garfiel, having reached the same conclusion, nodded back as they immediately drove their heels into the ground to return to sprinting at full speed. Their destination: the nearest shelter.

[Al: Hey! Wait for me!]

Lagging behind the two, Al frantically tried to catch up behind them.

With speed as his only concern, Subaru went on kicking his feet into the pavement, oblivious to his surroundings. While Garfiel's every step widened the gap between them, and within a matter of seconds, he had left Subaru behind and disappeared into the split in the road ahead.

According to the map, there should be a shelter right beyond the corner Garfiel took.

[Al: Watch the road!]

[Subaru: Garfiel ran ahead without fighting! That means no one's there!]

Roughly answering the call from behind, Subaru reached the corner shortly after Garfiel. Turning without breaking his momentum, he sighted the small stone shed.

Wildly swinging open the door and then confirming that there were stairs leading below, Subaru rushed down in a frenzy. And, gradually, as his dim field of vision opened up — —

[Subaru: No way.....]

— — Amid bloody pools and echoing wails, a picture of hell unfolded before him.

[Al: They killed each other..... 'til only one in five're still breathin'. They'll need absolute rest... this's as bad as it gets...]

Looking over the scene of carnage once more, Al let out a stifled mutter.

Meanwhile, sitting next to him, Subaru had no strength to reply.

After being driven into the refuge-shelter, the gathered refugees had slaughtered each other.

It probably started over something trivial.

They were crammed into this narrow space, in fear of the Witch Cult's demands.

While time passed like this, terrible thoughts began creeping into their hearts. "The situation won't improve even if we wait here like this, will it?" "Shouldn't we try to do something?"

Those surfacing thoughts compelled them to action, and action meant contact

with others. But contact doesn't always end well.

The same thing happened when Garfiel and Al clashed on the street.

But in here, Subaru wasn't around to stop them. The arguments escalated, emotions collided as it also spread to their surroundings, turning into a vicious cycle.

Hate and mutual frustration boiled until they became unbearable, finally ending in tragedy.

[Garfiel: I knocked the survivors unconscious n' treated their wounds. Buryin' the dead.....'ll have t'wait. Captain, y'send word yet?]

[Subaru: Yeah. The Iron Fang are on their way. We can let them carry the survivors back, I think..... But the problem now is...]

Subaru had underestimated the damage that the amplification and propagation of emotions could cause.

In the confined space of the refuge-shelter, it was impossible to predict the range of the emotions passing through the minds of those trapped inside. Naturally, they couldn't be expected to stay positive, but even with negative sentiments, the outcomes can vary dramatically with the type of emotion.

It'd be nice if it started with sorrow and gloom which don't involve any active behavior.

However, if the first emotion to spread was something like anger, clearly the result would be just what happened in this shelter.

[Subaru: When you're chased out of your home and forced to hide in a shelter..... anyone would feel some resentment...]

Considering that the Authority of “Wrath” shares and amplifies emotions, the more people are within range of the Authority, the more effective it will be.

Simply put, imagine if all the people around you are mirrors, any light you project will be reflected back to you. If light here is replaced with emotions, it goes without saying that they would come back amplified.

Even the most simple contact with others could have horrible consequences.

It is an Authority that would force a person to be alone even when tormented by anxiety and fear.

[Subaru: Makes me wanna puke.....]

[Garfiel: Captain, what’s the plan? I’m on board with checkin’ th’other shelters, but if this goes on...]

After treating the wounded, Garfiel came over with sweat dotting his brows, looking uneasy. Subaru could understand Garfiel’s anxiety, but he was still at a loss as to how to respond.

He just couldn’t make up his mind. The idea of checking the refuge-shelters, looking for combatants to join them and warding off the spread of desperation isn’t itself wrong.

But, the urgency of the situation wouldn’t allow Subaru to slowly search through the city.

It was even possible that the few people who had the will to fight would actually accelerate the tragedy. In a sense, the refuge-shelters had become like petri-dishes of emotions. Maybe persuading them to leave the shelters instead might just increase their chances of survival.

[Subaru: But at this rate, if we don't take back the Control Tower, everyone will die]

These were the refuge-shelters of urban Priestella.

These shelters were likely designed for surviving floods when the floodgates are released. In the unlikely event that Subaru would be forced to release the floodgates, the people who left their shelter to avoid killing each other would be doomed.

Whether it was staying inside or coming outside, there were no perfect solutions.

[Garfiel: Captain.....]

[Subaru: ————]

Garfiel's voice jabbed the indecisive Subaru's side.

It was a voice yearning for answers, and salvation. Like someone seeking a guiding light in the darkness to cling to.

Just how should he answer that expectation?

Subaru was just as lost. Fumbling in the dark, Subaru was just as lost as he was.

But, there was no point in showing his weakness here. He wouldn't be saving anyone by throwing a tantrum. With the time it takes to complain, he could say something meaningful instead.

Something, anything, as long as it does some good.

[Al: “Captain, Captain” you sure have a lot of faith in him to keep chantin’ that prayer, lil’bro. You two’re so sweet I’m gonna cry, y’know.....]

But, while Subaru racked his brain for something to say, it was the one-armed man who broke the silence. Leaning against the wall looking over the carnage, Al turned his gaze to Garfiel.

Those sardonic words stunned Garfiel for a moment.

[Garfiel: Hah? Th’fuck’s that supposed t’.....]

[Al: You can’t tell? It’s exactly what it sounds like. Stop mindlessly mewling, expecting others to make the decisions for you. “Captain”, what is that, some kind of prayer? Callin’ to some kinda superman who could just fix everything no matter what it is?]

Cutting Garfiel off, Al went on mocking,

[Al: All I’ve seen from you so far is reliance, but does this guy really look like someone to rely on? When it comes to fighting, you’re way stronger. If it’s smarts, there’s bound to be someone smarter. Even if it’s luck, well, if you call this situation lucky no one’s gonna believe you]

[Garfiel: Shut up! Who d’ya think y’are, criticizin’ th’Captain!? The fuck’d you know about this guy!? Y’know how incredible he is!?!]

[Al: Incredible? What’re you, ten? What’s so incredible about him? If he’s really incredible, he’d have done somethin’ by now. Or does he already have a plan and he’s just screwin’ with us?]

Al's sarcastic tone was unfazed by Garfiel's barked retaliation. Al bent down his waist to look Subaru in the face, but Subaru didn't say anything in reply.

Seeing this, Al stretched out his back once again with [See?],

[Al: If he could take everythin' on his shoulders and fix every last one of'em, that'd really be somethin'. He'd be a protagonist at that rate. But most of us average folk can't take that kinda responsibility. Naturally, that's true for me, but the same goes for the bro here. So why put kinda burden on him? Don't be expectin' too much. I kinda feel sorry for the guy]

[Subaru: ———]

Subaru had no idea why Al was saying this.

Was he being influenced by the Authority of Wrath again? If so, just what kind of emotion was dominating Al's mind right now?

Was it anger, sadness, or some other emotion?

It almost seemed like indignation, but also lamentation, or even derision. Even this was too difficult to tell.

[Al: Say, bro. What're you thinkin' so hard for, anyway?]

[Subaru:What am I... um]

For a way to save this city. To make sure the people in the refuge-shelters don't get hurt.

To save Emilia. To heal Crusch. To retrieve Rem. To drive out the Witch Cultists. To find the optimal path in which everyone is saved.

[Al: It's for your Princess-sama, can't you even give an immediate answer like that?]

[Subaru: ———]

Hearing Al's disappointed voice, Subaru lifted his head.

Al kept his gaze on Subaru. Since he was wearing a helmet, Subaru couldn't see his face. But, for some reason, Subaru felt his own chest tighten.

[Al: As for me, I'm doin' everything for Princess-san..... Priscilla. So frankly I don't really give a damn about what happens to the other people. Followin' you too, it's just so I could increase my survival chances and the chances of findin' Princess-san]

[Subaru: Al.....]

[Al: That's why I don't get you, bro. "This's important, that' things a priority too"..... if you keep thinkin' like that, you can't see what's the most important anymore. Tryin' to get everythin' at once, isn't that just the overused excuse of a guy who can't sacrifice everything for the one thing most important to him?]

Clicking his tongue, Al seemed to be stifling some kind of emotion.

Even Garfiel couldn't bring himself to interrupt his overwhelming ferocity. And Subaru, on the receiving end of that feeling, could not answer him with any confidence.

[Al: The one thing most important to you, isn't it that missy with the silver

hair? If you wanna help that young lady, then stop agonizin' and start takin' some action. Simple, isn't it?]

[Subaru:How can you say that? I'll definitely kill the bastard who took Emilia, but as much as I want to, we still don't even have a plan yet. You think this is going to be easy?]

[Al: Yeah, but that's gotta easier than tryin' to save everything at once. Don't force yourself, lighten the load a bit, and you'll see a change in what you can or cannot do. Am I wrong?]

Subaru's whimpering resistance was shot down by Al's biting statements.

[Al: Are you tryin' be a saint or a hero? There's a limit to how much you can overreach, y'know]

With a shrug, Al swiped Subaru's indecision aside as he would something stupid. Meanwhile, listening to him, Subaru couldn't help but be confounded.

When Subaru was arguing with Anastasia in the City Hall, insisting on a stance based purely on impulse, it was none other than Al who took his side.

Al was the one who voiced his support for Subaru's obstinate self-satisfaction. Yet why was he completely turning it on its head now?

[Subaru: That's not what you said back then, is it? Were you on my side or weren't you? Which is it?]

[Al: Nonono, you got it wrong. I never said it's bad to pursue self-satisfaction.

I'm sayin' it's about time you saw the limits of your self-satisfaction. After seein' the carnage in here, you still think you can save everyone and everything? Enough's enough, isn't it? Just be honest and protect the most important thing, to hell with rest of it]

[Subaru: To hell with.....you mean just run away? When the situation's like this?]

[Al: What's wrong with that? When there's nothin' you can do, what's wrong with runnin' away? For me, once I pick up Princess-san, I'm leggin' my way outta here. I got no reason or obligation to risk my life for the people here]

Sticking a finger into the bottom of his helmet, Al scratched his neck, staring at the astonished Subaru.

[Al: You should do that too, bro. Just save the missy..... Emilia, and get as far away as you can from here. Since even if you wipe out pests like the Witch Cult, they'll just start creepin up again in no time. They're like the whackos that randomly slash people on the streets. Just gettin' involved with them is bad news]

In Al's view, there was only one solution.

The Witch Cultists were indeed like pests, Subaru wholeheartedly agreed with that. And he also couldn't deny that nothing good can come from getting involved with them.

But the Culists were the ones who had decided to get involved. Subaru was only putting out fires as they came.

Like Al said, there was probably no way to know why they were doing what they do.

And of course, Emilia being taken hostage made all the difference. But even if Emilia wasn't involved, Subaru wouldn't have run away.

If you ask why——

[Al: You don't have to be the one to do it, bro. So why bother?]

[Subaru: When you see a child jumping into an intersection at a red light, without thinking, you'll run up and grab him, right?Maybe it's kind of like that]

[Al: ————]

Al sucked in a breath at Subaru's answer.

Was everything he just said solved by a simple answer like that? It wasn't clear. But it was true that when Subaru sank into thought, that was the answer that came to mind. It was also true his chest felt lighter after he said it.

[Subaru: I don't think of them case by case like trifling things. Since I am here, I will do what's within my power. I know there are plenty of things beyond my reach, one look at the people here and it's obvious. But...]

Wouldn't it be cowardly to pretend that everything was beyond his reach?

Surely, Subaru would never do that, would he?

[Garfiel: Cap.....]

Garfiel almost called out to Subaru when he heard that calm answer.

But just when he was about to say the word “Captain”, Garfiel hesitated. Perhaps because Al pointed it out just now, Garfiel felt somewhat reluctant to use it.

Subaru was slightly amused to see Garfiel pausing for consideration.

At the same time, he thought of something. An idea.

An ingenious idea that could just turn the Authority of Wrath to their advantage.

[Subaru: Garfiel, no need to hesitate. Just say it like usual]

[Garfiel: ———]

[Subaru: It made me kinda embarrassed at first, but I’m used to it by now. I can’t guarantee that I’ll be able to meet that expectation, but I will do the best I can]

Subaru wasn’t sure what he must have looked like in Garfiel’s expectant eyes.

But, when Garfiel had thought himself trapped in a dead-end, Subaru’s actions made him see hope. It was the same for the lonely girl who had once cursed everything in this world.

That was why Subaru must take responsibility for his actions.

[Garfiel:A-aye, Captain. Understood. Same here, I’ll give everythin’ I got t’help. So no more whimperin’]

[Subaru: Good. Then I’ll be counting on you. Once we hand the wounded over

to the Iron Fang, let's return to the City Hall right away. Anastasia will probably oppose it, after all]

Dusting off his butt as he stood up, Subaru gave Garfiel a few pats on the shoulder.

Seeing Garfiel give an affirming snort and tighten his fists, Subaru turned around to face the silent Al,

[Subaru: My gut has made its decision. It may be different from what you wanted]

[Al:Suit yourself, bro. At least, 'til I decide that movin' with you guys won't get me any closer to findin' Princess-san, I'll keep stickin' around]

Despite his proposal being shot down, Al replied without any apparent hard feelings.

While sensing something incomprehensible about that attitude, Subaru directed his steps outside in order to prepare to move out as soon as reinforcement arrives.

Garfiel followed behind him, and Al as well, a little further away.

Looking at the backs of the two walking ahead, Al supported his neck by placing his single right arm behind his head, and then exhaled a long sigh,

[Al: Wonder what'll happen.....tryin' to live up to all those people's expectations. You probably won't know 'til you really end up payin' for it]

Chapter 41: Heroic Reveries

[Anastasia: You sure came back early?]

As they returned to the City Hall, Anastasia greeted them with a somewhat strained smile.

Having left the building full of bravado only to return like this, honestly, Anastasia's was about the last face Subaru wanted to see.

But this was no time to be concerned with such feelings.

[Subaru: Yeah, I'm back. But I'll head out again as soon as I'm done here. There's just something I have to try in the City Hall first]

[Anastasia: Did you come up with somethin' again? I got a bad feelin' about this]

[Subaru: Well..... the first shelter was a horrible sight, I mentioned that in the communication mirror already. And I think the influence of Wrath must have affected other shelters as well]

[Anastasia: So they've succumbed to the emotional resonance... It's not like I don't feel it myself. If I let my mood drop, it feels like it'll just keep on droppin' forever.But I guess it works a little differently on everybody]

Subaru nodded at Anastasia's analysis.

In fact, Subaru had also noticed this on the street. The effectiveness of Sirius' Authority can vary drastically between people.

Perhaps simply being aware of the Authority's existence could help alleviate its effects: The fact that Subaru was able to calm Garfiel and Al this way precisely proved this.

[Al: I dunno how the shelter got like that, but I can't help but worry 'bout the same thing happenin' to our main guys bunched up here. I'd really rather I didn't come back here only to get caught up in another blood sacrifice or somethin']

[Anastasia: Well, you had no need to worry about that. Luckily, we only have intelligent, rational people here. Though I can't say the same about the guy who's always screwin' up the atmosphere]

Al, who came back with Subaru, said this while looking around the first floor of the City Hall. Hearing this, Anastasia snorted, putting a stop to Al's smart-assery with a gibe.

Seeing Al reply with a silent shrug, Anastasia turned back to Subaru.

[Anastasia: So, what're you plannin' to do? You came back 'cause you had an idea, right?]

[Subaru: Aah, right.By the way, where's Julius? He isn't with you?]

[Anastasia: I don't like bein' bombarded with question after question, you know..... Julius' been actin' a little strange. I think part of it's because we haven't found Joshua yet, but I've a feelin' that's not all of it]

[Subaru: Acting strange..... Now that you mention it, he was a little strange, wasn't he?]

Waking up after the failed attack on the City Hall, Subaru did notice that Julius was less articulate than usual. He seemed to be making judgements and suggestions that he would never have made in normal circumstances, and there was a visible lack of confidence about him.

He was a man with a strong sense of duty. Subaru had thought that it was because of regret for letting Gluttony escape, but perhaps it was more than that.

[Garfiel: Capt'n. It's a bad habit t'be concernin' yerself with every problem out there. I know you're worried 'bout Julius, but that ain't somethin' we can fix right now]

[Subaru: Ah, yeah, you're right. Well, I'm sure that guy'll do just fine on his own without anyone worrying about him. Compared to that, we got our own things to deal with. Anastasia-san. The broadcaster on the top floor is still in working condition, right? It's not like it's broken, or we lost the manual or something...]

Brought back by Garfiel's reminder, Subaru asked this question. On the receiving end, Anastasia blinked her round eyes a few times before answering,

[Anastasia: It's not broken, and I've worked with similar devices before so that's fine..... but what do you plan to do with it?]

Seeing the surprise in Anastasia's eyes, Subaru scratched his cheek.

Even though he'd expect her to oppose it, it was the only plan he could think of. In terms of minimizing casualties, it would also be the most effective measure.

[Subaru: As I said in the communication mirror, the area is currently under the influence of Wrath's Authority. The shelter we visited..... became washed in blood because some small irritation was allowed to fester. The slightest negative emotion could spiral into the extremest disaster. It's scary]

[Anastasia: Yes. My thoughts exactly. The more people there are, the harder it is to control and the more rapidly panic spreads. That said, with the refuge shelters..... or even without the shelters, people will tend to huddle together. Right?]

Subaru quietly nodded to Anastasia's question.

What's so frightening about Sirius' Authority is that the more people are together, the more powerful its influence becomes. And when people heard the Witch Cult's threats over the broadcasts, that started an inescapable trend of panic: A truly sickening way of exploiting people's helplessness.

It was unclear whether the Witch Cult was hoping for their cooperation, but the fact is that it created a vicious cycle that was threatening those people's lives this very moment.

[Anastasia: Do you mean to say... you've thought of a way to counter it?]

[Subaru: It's only a "Maybe this could work" kinda thing. I do think it's worth trying. It's just.....]

Subaru's words abruptly trailed off in front of Anastasia's expectant gaze.

Seeing this, Anastasia narrowed her eyes as if to peer into Subaru's innermost thoughts, while Subaru exhaled a deep breath,

[Subaru: Once we start doing it, everything will be heard by the Witch Cult, word for word. So there's the possibility that we could run into other dangers if we provoke those guys]

[Anastasia: And in exchange, there's a good chance that we can reduce the existing threat]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. Now that we've retaken the City Hall, and with Sirius' Authority being the only one affecting the shelters... even though it's hard to balance the risks, I still think.....]

It's impossible to imagine how the Witch Cult will react if they did something big here. The dangers were equivalent to bringing a burning match into a gunpowder arsenal, as is always the case when dealing with the Witch Cult. What makes it so difficult to assess is that the gunpowder could also blow on its own at any moment whether they bring in the match or not.

[Anastasia: —I think I know more or less what you're planning to do now, Natsuki-kun]

[Subaru: Really?]

After briefly sinking into thought, Anastasia let out a long sigh and said. Hearing this, Subaru raised his brows, surprised at her reaction,

[Anastasia: Going by the flow of the conversation, and since you asked about the broadcasting device at the start, I'd be more worried if I still can't figure it out after that]

[Subaru: W-well, yeah, I guess. So what do you think? You're against it, aren't you?]

She'll probably oppose it, just as he thought beforehand.

And so, Subaru would have no other choice than to clear the giant hurdle of convincing Anastasia— —

[Anastasia: Haa, what am I gonna do with you...]

[Subaru:Egh, you're ok with it?]

[Anastasia: Logically speaking, it would be the best course of action. Regardless of how much I like winning, if it means leaving a mountain of corpses behind by the time we eradicate the Witch Cult, there'd be too bad of an aftertaste]

Getting that unexpected answer, for a moment, Subaru stood there stunned.

Meanwhile, Anastasia chewed her lips as if trying to deal with some indigestible emotion inside her, but it was Garfiel who broke the silence.

[Garfiel: Yo, Capt'n and Big'Sis-chan. What're you guys talkin' 'bout doin' again?]

[Anastasia: Such an unperceptive child... Even my Ricardo could've figured it out]

To Garfiel, who was left out of the loop, Anastasia tossed that unsparing remark. Garfiel gritted his fangs as he heard this, but Al patted his shoulder

from behind, laughing at Garfiel as he turned around,

[Al: Basically, what bro's thinkin' is this: Rather than tryin' to stop the Authority of Wrath from spreadin' throughout the city, it'd be quicker 'n easier to try to turn it to our advantage instead]

[Garfiel: Turn it, like what.....]

[Subaru: Sirius' ability causes the sharing of emotions. When people are anxious and afraid, that emotion swells as more people bunch together, until eventually, it gets set off by something small and explodes. So...]

[Anastasia: If you can replace fear and anxiety with another emotion..... paint it over with something like hope, then that'll be what's shared instead]

Garfiel's question was answered by Al, and Subaru, then lastly by Anastasia.

While listening, Garfiel's eyes grew wider as he leaked a groan of understanding,

[Garfiel: Aaah so that's it! Then they won't be killin' each other. And if things go well, even the ones whose spirits're broken'll return to the fight]

[Subaru: When they're engulfed by the surrounding atmosphere, even seasoned fighters would be unable to stand. If we can release them from that anxiety, I think we won't have any problem bolstering our forces anymore]

[Garfiel: Ain't that awesome!? Do it, Capt'n! We got th'arcane device. So th'sooner we start.....]

[Anastasia: Wait wait! It's not all that simple. It's not like I hadn't considered it myself...]

Anastasia clapped her hands to stop the over-excited Garfiel.

Seeing this, Garfiel bared his fangs,

[Garfiel: Hah? Why're we holdin' off? Y'just said you agreed, didn't ya? Don't tell me you're backin' out at th'last minute]

[Anastasia: I never said I'm backin' out. I told you, I've thought about this. There's another problem to this other than just weighin' the pros and cons]

[Subaru: The pros and cons... the ones we talked about earlier?]

[Anastasia: The pro is the goal of this strategy itself: Eliminating anxiety and despair from the citizens so we don't have that constant threat at our backs. The con is that whatever we broadcast into the city would naturally also get into the ears of Witch Cult. We have absolutely no idea how they'll react]

Anastasia raised her hands to both Garfiel and Subaru, and with [However], she continued,

[Anastasia: In terms of disadvantages, I believe they're almost negligible. The Witch Cult never forbade resistance when they made their demands in the first place. It's as if they don't even mind if they're thwarted or opposed]

[SubaruNow that you mention it, even though we attacked the City Hall,

they didn't use that as an excuse to exact any retribution. It's like what they did to the people in the City Hall was just for their own amusement]

[Anastasia: Amusement? I like that word. It's a pretty accurate way of describing those guys' sick inclinations]

Anastasia sighed, while Subaru wanted to gag just at the thought of those Sin Archishops' faces.

However, they both agreed that there was no extra risk in making the broadcast itself. So then, Anastasia's concern was— —

[Anastasia: While I've no objections about the broadcast itself, the problem is..... what'll it contain, and who'll be saying it]

[Subaru: What and who.....?]

Not understanding what Anastasia was saying, Subaru furrowed his brows.

If she was asking about who should make the broadcast over the city to rouse up the people's hopes and chase away their anxiety, then— —

[Subaru: Well, that's where Anastasia-san comes in. People recognize you as a Royal Selection Candidate. If something inspiring comes from Anastasia-san's mouth.....]

[Anastasia: This might sound strange coming from me, but I think it's difficult to expect that kind of effect from my words. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not up to that task]

[Subaru: ———]

Anastasia shook her head at Subaru's intuitive suggestion.

Subaru didn't understand her meaning. Since, naturally, the whole of Priestella would know about Anastasia's position as a Royal Selection Candidate.

Her fame certainly far exceeded anyone else present.

[Subaru: Not up to it... why? I mean, Anastasia-san, you're...]

[Anastasia: If renown is all that matters, then I would indeed be the most suitable. If that's all it took to change things for the better, then I'd be happy to do it. But that's not how things are. My renown and beatin' the Witch Cult are not related at all. Just knowing that "Someone famous is fighting the Witch Cult" — might do something, or it might not]

[Subaru: But.....]

[Anastasia: In that case, it'd be pointless. What's needed is hope. Hope that could replace all the anxiety in people's hearts with a single stroke]

Subaru had no words to reply to Anastasia's statement.

Honestly, he wanted to chide her for her faintheartedness and refute what she was saying. However, it wasn't anyone else, but Anastasia herself who seemed to rue the pitifulness of that statement the most.

Anastasia could not have said those words without thinking. Quite the opposite.

It was precisely because she had thought it over thoroughly that she had

judged herself unworthy of that role.

[Anastasia: I may be able to trick and beguile people with magnificent words. And I'm sure that out of every ten, five would be deceived. But it'd be only a frail, desperate straw that would give way at the slightest whiff of wind, and all it would accomplish is create a momentary change in feeling]

[Subaru: Th-then..... what about Crusch-san? She has the military experience and belongs to a noble family of Lugnica]

[Anastasia: Right, the words would certainly carry weight if it came from Crusch-san, but that would be the former Crusch-san. The current Crusch-san doesn't have that kind of influence over people. Not to mention that Crusch-san is currently fighting for her life. That's a problem that'll have to be settled before askin' her to inspire anyone else]

[Subaru: Fighting for her life? It's that bad!?!]

Hearing that Crusch was in even worse state he had been told, Subaru took a step towards Anastasia.

With the height difference between them, Anastasia looked up at Subaru and tightened her lips. Subaru quickly turned to Garfiel, only to see him weakly shaking his head,

[Garfiel: Th'cat-eared Sis' won't let her die, I'm sure'of it. She's injected so much life-force into her..... but I'm against lettin' her talk in front of the broadcastin' device as well. Hell, she can barely make a sound.....]

[Subaru: Damn it! Then what about Julius? If it's Julius, he'd.....]

[Anastasia: It's true that Julius is a Knight of the Royal Guard, one of the greatest Knights in the Kingdom, and my pride. But how much would Julius' name mean in this city? At best, his chances about the same as mine. And I'm more eloquent]

Crusch was out of the question, and Julius was also shot down.

Of the faces in the City Hall who could possibly inspire hope in others, only Wilhelm and Ricardo were left. But Ricardo has neither the influence nor the popularity.

And how could anyone ask this of Wilhelm now? Even if he agreed, what advantage would Wilhelm's title as former head of the Royal Guard even bring to the table?

[Subaru: Then, what do we do? Who else is there.....?]

[Al: Well...]

Just when Subaru thought he had found an effective countermeasure against Wrath, he was stuck without anyone to execute it.

While Subaru sank into these thoughts, Al casually raised his hand,

[Al: If anyone's gonna do the broadcast, shouldn't it be you, bro?]

[Subaru: ——Hah?]

Hearing him say this as if it were a matter of course, it took Subaru a moment to react.

Leaving his mouth gaping open, there was nearly no need to think twice about what Al had just said.

Making such an unfunny joke at a time like this, what was he thinking?

[Subaru: Say, Al. We're in the middle of a serious conversation here. The kind where every second counts. I can't deal with your jokes right now]

[Al: Oyoy, wait a minute. I'm aware that I'm a guy Princess-san hired because more than half of my remarks are irrelevant, but I wasn't joking just now]

[Subaru: If you weren't joking then what made you think I could do it? Either you're trying to be funny or you're mad, and I don't know which's worse here]

[Al: What's so crazy 'bout that? Why don't you have a look around?]

Although Al was someone who has “Not Serious” written all over him, at that, he suddenly lowered his voice and nudged with his chin. Following his movement, Subaru shifted his gaze to the two others beside him——Anastasia and Garfiel. Though Subaru had imagined that they must be just as baffled by what they had heard,

[Subaru:Oy, you guys too?]

[— — — —]

Their gazes were serious, certainly not surprised or annoyed at all.

They were staring at Subaru with sincere affirmation in their eyes.

It was almost as if they were saying they agree with Al.

[Subaru: You're kidding, right? Why do you look like you're all agreeing here? If Anastasia and Julius can't do it, what makes you think I can!?!]

[Al: Well, like I said on the street, we all got this far because of you, bro. Garfiel agrees with me. The way he keeps callin' you "Captain, Captain" and all]

[Subaru: How're those two things connected!?!]

[Al: Same thing! You must've done somethin' right to make Garfiel call you that. That just shows how much he trust ya, right? You seem to think what you did wasn't that big of a deal for some reason. But aside from you, who else in this city or this world can say that they've defeated "Sloth" of the Witch Cult?]

[Subaru: ————]

Al brought his face right up to Subaru's.

His cold helmet bumped into Subaru forehead, and a small warmth could be felt through the icy hard metal, coming from Al's forehead on the other side. For a moment, feeling himself pierced through by his invisible eyes, Subaru held his breath.

[Al: In a city occupied by the Witch Cult, who better to inspire hope in people than a man who's killed a Witch Cult Sin Archbishop? The only ones around who meet that criteria are you and Reinhardt. And you're the only one here]

[Subaru: ——gh]

Getting hit with another bump to the forehead, Subaru stumbled backwards.

Watching Subaru back away holding his forehead, and Al gave his single shoulder a shrug.

[Anastasia: I'm of the same opinion. If anyone should do it, it'd be you, Natsuki-kun]

[Subaru: Anastasia.....]

Saying this, Anastasia looked down.

It was an expression that seemed to be lamenting her own powerlessness, all the while entrusting that hope to someone else.

At this point, seeing that expression, Subaru finally noticed the great expectation resting on his back.

[Subaru: Garfiel... you think so too?]

[Garfiel: I dunno any details 'bout you killin' some Sin-bishop "Sloth" or whatever. But yeah, I'm thinkin' th'same thing]

At Subaru's quiet question, Garfiel scratched at his short head of hair,

[Garfiel: If there's a voice in this city that can become people's hopes..... I say that voice'd be your's, Capt'n. If y'really give it your all, I've a feelin' y'can do it. That's what I think]

[Subaru: ———]

That is baseless, and tremendously heavy trust.

Surprised, and holding his breath, Subaru clearly understood the magnitude of the faith placed in him.

Looking back, he saw Anastasia. Who nodded.

Next, he saw Al. Who shrugged his shoulder.

As before, Garfiel was still watching Subaru. When Subaru turned to face him, he nodded as well.

[Subaru: ———]

Taking in each of their reactions, Subaru turned up his head.

Narrowing his eyes to the light of the weak crystal lamp, he exhaled a long, deep sigh.

——They think way, way too highly of him.

He had felt it from Wilhelm, Julius, and Reinhardt as well.

They've got it all wrong about Subaru. All wrong.

They themselves were so much better, have worked so much harder, and were so much nobler than he was.

Yet, as if it were a matter of course, they praise Subaru, offer him their help, and greet him with such warmth. That fact had always tormented Subaru.

When the person you respect, the person you don't want to lose to, and the

person you can never catch up to all give you their affirmation, it's not just a simple matter of being overjoyed.

It made him anxious. That someday, when his real self is exposed, he will surely disappoint them.

When they realize that the real Subaru is actually pathetic, weak, and hopeless, surely, they'll be saddened, and will regret the warmth they had shown him.

That was what he had always thought. And yet,

Even Al, Garfiel, and Anastasia, had such expectations of Subaru.

On the verge of being crushed by its weight, Subaru had pushed himself to his limit, and yet his limit was not nearly enough as he tried to live up to that expectation over and over.

This is the road Natsuki Subaru chose.

—The road he had once promised to a single girl that he would take. Her hero's road.

But, one way or another, he was no longer just her hero. What Subaru was carrying now, was—

[Al: If you do this, bro, from now on it'll be heroic reveries that you'll be carryin' on your back]

Al suddenly gave this warning to the silent Subaru.

Watching Subaru's eyes drop, Al continued in a listless voice,

[Al: You can never lose. You must only win. You'll take up their hopes, carry

their expectations, and fight to show them the future. If you make this decision here, that's what you'll have to do]

[Subaru:I can never lose, huh. Sounds just like how it's always been, doesn't it?]

[Al: The weight of it's different. If bro loses here, the defeat won't just end with bro]

Subaru didn't understand what Al was saying.

Subaru's battles had always been this way. When Subaru loses, Subaru isn't the only one who's lost. Everything Subaru wanted to protect would be lost with Subaru's defeat.

It had always this way. It had never been otherwise.

If defeat didn't cost him anything, he would have had no reason to fight.

The fact that Subaru was fighting was because there were things that could not be protected unless he fought.

And after today, their numbers would swell to unbelievable proportions.

[Subaru: Tch, isn't that still how it's always been?]

[Al: ————]

Exhaling a sigh, he had made up his mind.

The pounding of his heart until now settled down as his vision cleared.

Though he couldn't see Al's face, he could sense that Al was holding his

breath, watching him with an astounded expression.

[Subaru: Anastasia-san, I'll do it. If my voice can make a difference, then leave it to me]

[Anastasia:You're sure? Once you take on people's hopes...]

[Subaru: It'll be no different from what I always do. "Hero", doesn't sound too bad, does it. Though honestly, it's a kinda embarrassing to be calling myself that.....]

Seeing Anastasia's worried expression, Subaru softly rubbed the tip of his nose,

[Subaru: If it's just a matter of being a hero, I've already made my decision a year ago. Otherwise, I'll bring shame to the girl watching over me, and the girl whose back I'm watching]

[Anastasia: ——Is that so. Well, alright. Boys always like to show off, after all]

As if saying "There's no helping it", Anastasia smiled, and gave Subaru a light poke in the chest.

Subaru was a little taken aback by that reaction.

Since that might've been the first time he had seen Anastasia let down her guard and show her true emotions.

With that feeling rapidly melting into his chest where he had been poked, Subaru lifted his face.

[Subaru: Thank you, Garfiel. Al. For helping me make up my mind]

Saying this to the two at his back, Subaru followed behind Anastasia.

Just what would he say when he's standing in front of the broadcasting device, he wondered.

He's still not sure what or what not to say.

But, strangely, there was no confusion or anxiety accompanying it.

After all, it's just the same as usual, right?

——Because he knew that, just as usual, he has no choice but to show off again.